

# In the Name of the Father, the Husband, or Some Other Man

## *The Subordination of Female Characters in Byzantine Historiography*

MATTHEW KINLOCH

This article identifies and explicates some—though by no means all—of the basic gendered dynamics that structure the production of female characters in George Akropolites' *Chronike syngraphe* (*Xρονικὴ συγγραφή*), a thirteenth-century historiographical narrative. In the *Chronike syngraphe*, female characters are syntactically and semantically subordinated to male characters in three foundational and intersecting ways. They are subordinated, first, by the manner in which they are grammatically signified, identified, and named; second, by what they are presented as doing in the story; and third, by how their actions are made meaningful within the wider narrative. By examining these three modes of subordination, with particular reference to the first, this article identifies and explicates the discursive violence that is a foundational element of the construction of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* and in Byzantine historiography more broadly.

My analysis approaches the *Chronike syngraphe* as a (historiographical) narrative and its characters as units of that narrative. It explores some of the gendered dynamics that govern the discursive production of a gendered subset of this narrative's cast (i.e., female characters). This is explicitly not an article about thirteenth-century women. It does not examine female characters as representations of humans from the past, nor does it use them to reconstruct the people or happenings of thirteenth-century Byzantium. Instead, it offers an analysis of Byzantine historiography outside of the reconstructive paradigm which has

traditionally governed that historiography's modern interpretation. Consequently, the analysis of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* presented here is a study of gendered textual dynamics—conceptualized as a contribution to a grammar or poetics of Byzantine historiographical narrative, rather than to the reconstruction of the Byzantine past.<sup>1</sup>

There is perhaps nothing surprising in the observation that female characters are produced as subordinate in Byzantine historiography. However, analyzing the discursive dynamics that produce female characters as subordinate not only generates new potentials specific to the study of gender—by producing more material for analysis, encouraging systematic analysis, and decentering privileged characters—but also demonstrates the wider potential of a nonreconstructive approach. The objective is neither to dismiss nor to replace reconstructive historiography, but rather

1 Such a grammar or poetics is understood as a loose and open heuristic framework for organizing and presenting the analysis of the textual dynamics of Byzantine historiographical narrative, rather than as an attempt to produce universal laws or abstract schemata. The basic concept of a grammar or poetics deployed here is influenced by structuralist narratology, along the lines suggested by I. Nilsson and C. Messis, "Eros as Passion, Affection and Nature: Gendered Perceptions of Erotic Emotion in Byzantium," in *Emotions and Gender in Byzantine Culture*, ed. S. Constantinou and M. Meyer (Cham, 2018), 180. For a gendered grammar, see H. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65–81.

to facilitate a mode of inquiry, capable of asking and answering alternative questions.<sup>2</sup>

This article has a tripartite structure. First, it introduces the *Chronike syngraphe* and the evolution of the analysis of its characters, then outlines the principal argument. In the second section, it examines some basic components of the presentation of female characters. In the third, three case studies are explored in detail. The first of these is Maria, who offers a typical example of an elite female character and provides a point of comparison for the second and third case studies, in which both the most and least prominent female characters in the text are examined—these being respectively the empress Irene and the *Chronike syngraphe*'s twenty-six unnamed female characters. In a short conclusion, future directions of study and the wider potential of a nonreconstructive approach to Byzantine historiographical narrative are elaborated.

### Narrative, Characters, and Gender in the *Chronike syngraphe*

The *Chronike syngraphe* (*Χρονικὴ συγγραφή*) is a prose historiographical narrative, consisting of 38,487 words of medieval Greek.<sup>3</sup> It narrates various happenings between ca. 1204 and 1261 in and around the Aegean, the southern Balkans, and western Anatolia, with a focus on the polity centered on Bithynia in northwest Anatolia, which has traditionally been called the empire of Nicaea. The text begins with various preludes to the conquest of Constantinople in 1204 by a group of Latins and ends mid-sentence (the text is incomplete), while narrating the triumphal entrance of the emperor of Nicaea, Michael VIII Palaiologos, into Constantinople after its conquest in 1261. The *Chronike syngraphe* thus offers a narrative about what happened in the period between 1204 and 1261, but not even-handedly. It focuses principally on warfare and political events and is firmly centered on the empire of Nicaea, though Seljuk, Bulgarian, Epirot, Trapezuntine, and

various Latin polities also feature regularly throughout the narrative. Its principal protagonists are the male rulers of the empire of Nicaea, while the narrative's other most prominent characters, most often the rulers of neighboring polities, are also consistently male and elite. Just as the text becomes less detailed the further it strays from the Nicaean empire and its rulers, so too it becomes less detailed the further it gets from the time of its composition in the late thirteenth century. The reigns of Theodore I Laskaris (r. 1205–1221) and John III Doukas-Vatatzes (r. 1221–1254) are thus narrated in less detail than those of Theodore II Laskaris (r. 1254–1258) and Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–1282). In addition, Akropolites, himself a character in his own story, and his patron Michael VIII Palaiologos receive disproportionately extensive and favorable treatment throughout the text.<sup>4</sup>

The *Chronike syngraphe* has become the principal source for modern reconstructions of the period it narrates (ca. 1204–61), as Ruth Macrides, the *Chronike syngraphe*'s main commentator and English translator, has observed: "The historical narrative by George Akropolites, the main Greek source for the period 1204–1261, has been used by generations of historians to reconstruct the political history of the so-called Empire of Nicaea."<sup>5</sup> The reconstructions of these generations of historians have been underwritten by a foundational premise that historiographical narratives, such as the *Chronike syngraphe*, represent the past and can be used as evidence to reconstruct it, even if that evidence is often indirect, problematic, and limited. In this reconstructive approach to historiography, the events described in the *Chronike syngraphe* are understood as representations of past happenings, its characters as representations of past humans, and its female characters as representations of past women.

The level of confidence with which scholars have equated the *Chronike syngraphe*'s events and characters with happenings and people from the thirteenth-century past has diminished over time. While the

2 J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), 6: "To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims."

3 *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg, corr. P. Wirth, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1978), 1:3–189 (hereafter Akropolites).

4 As elaborated by R. Macrides, introduction to *George Akropolites: "The History"* (Oxford, 2007), 3–101.

5 R. Macrides, "Georgios Akropolites (1217–1282), Die Chronik: Übersetzt und erläutert von Wilhelm Blum," *BSL* 53 (1992): 275. See also Macrides, *George Akropolites*, ix, 5; D. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros* (Oxford, 1957), x; A. Heisenberg, "Studien zur Textgeschichte des Georgios Akropolites," *Programm des Kgl. Humanistischen Gymnasiums zu Landau* (Landau, 1894), 5.

earliest modern treatments initially conceived of the *Chronike syngraphe* (somewhat credulously) as a transparent window through which past reality could be perceived, it has increasingly come to be understood as opaque in various ways.<sup>6</sup> Three such ways are particularly relevant to this article.

First, principally thanks to Macrides, the implication of the *Chronike syngraphe* in the political and personal struggles both of the period narrated and of the period in which the text was composed has become increasingly central to how the text is used as a source for reconstructing the thirteenth-century past. Historians no longer believe that Akropolites' presence at the Nicaean court necessarily makes the *Chronike syngraphe* a reliable account of what actually happened in the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Macrides' work has forced historians (in theory if not always in practice) to acknowledge, among other things, the *Chronike syngraphe's* implication in Laskarid-Palaiologan dynastic rivalry, unionist/anti-unionist religious polemic, and the careerist positioning of Akropolites.<sup>8</sup>

Second, and again in no small part thanks to Macrides' scholarship, historians have also become increasingly sensitive to the literary and rhetorical qualities of the *Chronike syngraphe*.<sup>9</sup> Historians, for example, no longer identify the *Chronike syngraphe's* erudite classicizing Greek style as evidence of its historical accuracy, but rather engage with the manner in which the classicizing language, rhetoric, and allusions

affect the reliability of the *Chronike syngraphe* as a historical source.<sup>10</sup>

Third, historians of Byzantium generally no longer accept overtly misogynistic depictions of women as transparent representations.<sup>11</sup> Instead, they acknowledge that the performance of gender roles is bound up in the characterization, moralizing, and political agenda of historiographical narratives.<sup>12</sup> Alongside this transformation, a concerted effort to identify and study women has also begun. Scholars have sought not only to render the lives and experiences of Byzantine women visible in a way that their textual production in both Byzantine and modern historiography had previously prevented, but also to identify and emphasize those spheres and historical conjunctures in which women can be framed as being empowered, having agency, or being politically active.<sup>13</sup> Gender has become the

10 For examples of the previous consensus, see A. Heisenberg, "Studien zu Georgios Akropolites," *SBMünch* (Munich, 1899), 464; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, vol. 1, *Philosophie, Rhetorik, Epistolographie, Geschichtsschreibung, Geographie* (Munich, 1978), 44G; G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, vol. 1, *Die byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvolker* (Berlin, 1958), 266 (quoted in Geōrgios Akropolitēs, *Die Chronik*, trans. W. Blum [Stuttgart, 1989], 28).

11 For examples of early practitioners, see C. Diehl, *Figures Byzantines* (Paris, 1908); S. Runciman, "The Empress Irene the Athenian," in *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M. T. Hill on the Occasion of Her Seventieth Birthday*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford, 1978), 101–18; S. Runciman, "Women in Byzantine Aristocratic Society," in *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. Angold (Oxford, 1984), 10–22; D. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits, 1250–1500* (Cambridge, 1994).

12 For a broad articulation of this position, see L. Neville, *Byzantine Gender* (Leeds, 2019).

13 This trend has not been particularly pronounced in the study of thirteenth-century women, who have received relatively limited treatment to date. For relevant examples of this phenomenon, see L. James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London, 2001); L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, A.D. 527–1204* (New York, 1999); J. Herrin, "Political Power and Christian Faith in Byzantium: The Case of Irene," in *Unrivaled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, ed. J. Herrin (Princeton, 2013), 194–207. On the domestication and incorporation of early women's history into the oppressive framework of institutionalized historiography, see K. Pihlainen, "The End of Oppositional History?," *Rethinking History* 15 (2011): 463–88. On attempts to render women visible, see J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988): 523: "Yet, in this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women."

6 In this regard treatments of the *Chronike syngraphe* roughly track the trajectory of modern historiography, both within and outside Byzantine studies.

7 For such a view of the account as less reliable, see M. Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile: Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicaea (1204–1261)* (Oxford, 1975), 3; M. Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society, 1204–1453* (Philadelphia, 1997), 12; Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 29, 30, n. 177. On Akropolites as a scholar, see C. Constantinides, *Higher Education in Byzantium in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries, 1204–ca. 1310* (Nicosia, 1982), 31–34.

8 R. Macrides, "The Historian in the History," in *Φιλέλλην: Studies in Honour of Robert Browning*, ed. C. Constantinides, N. Panagiotakes, E. Jeffreys, and A. Angelou (Venice, 1996), 205–24.

9 For the most cogent general statement of this position, see R. Macrides, "Editor's Preface," in *History as Literature in Byzantium*, ed. R. Macrides (Farnham, 2010), ix–xi.

go-to “critical” term to describe phenomena related to women, eunuchs, and (to a much lesser extent) men from the Byzantine past, but an embrace of the foundational theoretical assumptions implied by this new terminological vernacular—namely, the dismissal of gender essentialism in favor of constructive and performative theories of gender—has not (for the most part) followed the terminological shift.<sup>14</sup>

Thus historians today no longer offer paraphrases of the *Chronike syngraphe* as if it simply described past reality, as Edward Gibbon did in the eighteenth and Antonios Meliarakes and Alice Gardner did at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Best practice has decisively changed, though less critical approaches have not been entirely abandoned—especially in the area of gender, where direct analysis of the *Chronike syngraphe* has been so limited that the transformation of the discipline is not entirely apparent. The window onto the thirteenth-century past offered by the *Chronike syngraphe* is now understood (at least in theory) to be opaque (e.g., politicized, literary, and androcentric). However, it is still regarded as a window, its narrative understood in representational terms, and its contents examined in order to reconstruct the past. Consequently, the female characters that appear in the *Chronike syngraphe* are now treated—insofar as they are treated at all—with increased care, but they are still viewed as representations of past women and analyzed in order to reconstruct the actions and lived experience of thirteenth-century women.<sup>16</sup>

My article breaks with this reconstructive approach by analyzing historiography (constituted of language and text and organized as narrative) as historiography and not as source material for the reconstruction of the past (constituted of all prior happenings, humans, and

matter).<sup>17</sup> Its analysis is concerned with the characters constructed by a historiographical narrative and not the past humans with whom they have traditionally been identified. The characters produced by the *Chronike syngraphe* are understood and examined as linguistically and textually constructed units of narrative, rather than as sources of information about past humans.<sup>18</sup> Further, the fact that some characters are identified as women (i.e., gendered female), while others are identified as men (i.e., gendered male), is not approached as representative of the physiological difference between the bodies of past humans, their intellectual or emotional dispositions, nor even their modes of socialization. Instead, these identifications are taken as one of many ways in which characters are discursively produced and differentiated in the *Chronike syngraphe*'s narrative.<sup>19</sup>

The nonreconstructive approach taken in this article is intended as neither a replacement nor a dismissal of reconstruction, since my objective is not to do reconstruction better, but rather to do something else. A nonreconstructive approach is adopted as a critical heuristic in response to three intertwined problems that have resulted from scholars approaching female

17 For an articulation of the core elements of this position, see K. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London, 2003). More specifically, see M. Kinloch, “Rethinking Thirteenth-Century Byzantine Historiography: A Postmodern, Narrativist, and Narratological Approach” (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2018), 1–21.

18 M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, 2009), 114–15; U. Margolin, “Character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman (Cambridge, 2007), 66–79. In this article, historiographical characters and past humans are understood to be ontologically discontinuous. On the ontology of characters, see J. Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford, 2014), esp. vii; J. Eder, F. Jannidis, and R. Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction,” in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, ed. R. Schneider, F. Jannidis, and J. Eder (Berlin, 2010), 6–10.

19 Note that the analysis of this article is limited to “women” and “men,” because there are no eunuchs in the *Chronike syngraphe*. On the late Byzantine decline of eunuchs, see N. Gaul, “Eunuchs in the Late Byzantine Empire, c. 1250–1400,” in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. S. Tougher (London, 2002), 199–219. More generally, see S. Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (London, 2008); K. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, 2003); J. Gleeson, “The Byzantine Eunuch: Pre-Capitalist Gender Category, ‘Tributary’ Modal Contradiction, and a Test for Materialist Feminism,” in *Marxist-Feminist Theories and Struggles Today: Essential Writings on Intersectionality, Labour and Ecofeminism*, ed. K. Fakier, D. Mulinari, and N. Räthzel (London, 2020), 70–87.

14 C. Messis, “Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society,” *Catholic Historical Review* 101 (2015): 148–49.

15 E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12 vols. (1776–89; repr. London, 1906), II:54–68; A. Meliarakes, *Ολγα λέξεις περί της καταγωγῆ των Σκενδέρημπεη* (Athens, 1876); A. Gardner, *The Lascaris of Nicaea* (London, 1912).

16 Neville, for example, is explicit about retaining past women as her object of study, using the expression “dead humans,” tongue-in-cheek, to reinforce the point; see *Byzantine Gender*, 2. For a related approach, see A. Kaldellis, “The Study of Women and Children: Methodological Challenges and New Directions,” in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson (London, 2010), 61–71.

characters, in narratives such as the *Chronike syngraphe*, as raw material for the reconstruction of past women. The consequences of focusing on reconstruction have been intensified by other factors in the study of female characters, although similar problems arise (to some extent) for all characters. First, female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*—like all characters—are endowed with semantic and syntactic features and entanglements that human beings do not possess. Conversely, they lack others that flesh-and-blood thirteenth-century women did possess. Past women, for example, exist continuously for a period of time, but female characters exist only momentarily, dropping in and out of existence as they are narrated (or not) in a story. Likewise, past women do not literally occupy grammatical positions, such as subject and object, whereas female characters, constituted as they are by language, must occupy such positions in order to be legible and engage in action. Such semantic and syntactic (i.e., historiographical) features must be ignored, negotiated, or overcome if past women are to be reconstructed, while those features that historiography lacks must be assumed. However, if female characters are approached as discursive units of narrative, then the textual, grammatical, and linguistic qualities of characters can be understood not as obstacles to accurate reconstruction but as constitutive qualities of the object under analysis. This approach thus opens a new domain for the analysis of historiography.

Second, the desire to reconstruct past women directs attention away from the systematic analysis of gender in narratives, such as the *Chronike syngraphe*, and toward the reconstruction of individual humans through the comparative analysis of multiple texts. This atomizes the analysis of narratives by organizing them according to their assumed relationship to the past, rather than examining how gender is produced across one or more narratives. Consequently, focusing on historiography, as opposed to the past, allows for the comprehensive analysis of individual narratives. It does not preclude comparative analysis but simply shifts the level of such analysis to comparison between whole narratives. This unitary approach is not intrinsically superior to the traditional fragmented approach to historiographical narratives, but it offers an alternative mode of analysis that has yet to be fully explored.

Third, the reconstructive impulse focuses attention on those female characters that receive sufficient attention in the narrative to reasonably sustain the

illusion of personhood. Crucially, attention is confined to those characters recognized as sufficiently human to enjoy reconstruction. As a result, in practice reconstruction thus almost always focuses on named elite female characters, most often empresses or other members of imperial or royal families.<sup>20</sup> However, even the study of empresses is chronologically uneven, with the later period remaining a lacuna until Petra Melichar's 2019 monograph (covering the period 1261–1453).<sup>21</sup> To date there is still no equivalent synthetic study of the empresses of the period narrated by the *Chronike syngraphe* (ca. 1204–61), although a handful of article-length studies offer the same biographical formula and reconstructive approach.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Byzantine historiography has not really been exploited as a source for the reconstruction of non-elite women. The few non-elite female characters that do appear in Byzantine historiographical narratives have tended to receive limited (or no) attention. Those studies that have sought out non-elite women have done so principally through other types of “evidence,” notably hagiography and various kinds of documentary texts.<sup>23</sup> A nonreconstructive

20 See A.-M. Talbot, “Women,” in *The Byzantines*, ed. G. Cavallo (Chicago, 1997), 117: “Historical sources, which emphasize political affairs and court intrigues, diplomacy, religious controversies, and military struggles, primarily the domains of men, rarely mention women except for members of the imperial family.”

21 P. Melichar, *Empresses of Late Byzantium: Foreign Brides, Mediators and Pious Women* (Berlin, 2019). Early and middle Byzantine empresses have received more attention from scholars than those of the late period. See, for example, the seminal studies of J. Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London, 2001); Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*; and B. Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium, 1025–1204: Power, Patronage and Ideology* (London, 1999).

22 For the period 1204–61, see E. Mitsiou, “Η αυτοκράτειρα της Νίκαιας Ειρήνη Δούκινα Κομνηνή, η ἀρρενωπότερον τὸ ἥθος ἔχουσα,” in *Φιλοτιμία: Τιμητικός τόμος για την ομότιμη καθηγήτρια Αλκυόνη Σταυρίδην-Ζαφράκη*, ed. T. Korres, et al. (Thessaloniki, 2011), 447–62; É. Malamut, “Marguerite-Marie de Hongrie, impératrice byzantine et reine latine de Salonique (1185–1223),” *BSL* 76 (2018): 213–29.

23 The writings of Alice-Mary Talbot and Elizabeth Clark suggest the theoretical range within which such work on hagiography has been carried out. See A.-M. Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, DC, 1996); eadem, “Women”; and eadem, *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2001); E. Clark, “Early Christian Women: Sources and Interpretation,” in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L. Coon, K. Haldane, and E. Sommer (Charlottesville, 1990), 19–35, and eadem, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” *ChHist* 70 (2000): 395–426. The oeuvre

approach to female characters in historiography thus offers the potential for a mode of analysis that can be applied to all characters—regardless of their anthropomorphic coherence and availability—and that does not methodologically prioritize those characters that are already most accessible. The unevenness of the historiographical record cannot be overcome. A nonreconstructive approach cannot make peasants more accessible than empresses, but it can ensure that the unevenness of historiography is not methodologically reinforced, reified, and naturalized in its analysis.

Some of the potential fruits of a nonreconstructive approach have already been realized in nonhistoriographical Byzantine studies. In disciplinary contexts in which the stakes for accepting that texts cannot directly represent past reality are less high—most notably hagiography, novels and romances, and art history—scholars have approached their objects of study from a less rigidly reconstructive perspective. This license derives from the identification of their objects of analysis as fictive, as they implicitly draw a contrast with a nonfictive historiography.<sup>24</sup> But because breaking

of Angeliki Laiou demonstrates the most concerted effort to use late Byzantine documentary texts to study women: A. Laiou, “The Role of Women in Byzantine Society,” *JÖB* 31 (1981): 233–60; *Women, Family and Society in Byzantium* (Farnham, 2011); “Addendum to the Report on the Role of Women in Byzantine Society,” *JÖB* 32 (1982): 98–103; “Women in the Marketplace of Constantinople (10th–14th Centuries),” in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden, 2001), 263–71; “Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women,” *ByzF* 9 (1985): 59–102. For the early use of monastic typika, see C. Galatariotou, “Byzantine Women’s Monastic Communities: The Evidence of the Typika,” *JÖB* 38 (1988): 263–90.

24 In the study of hagiography, see S. Constantinou, “Performing Gender in Lay Saints’ Lives,” *BMGS* 38 (2014): 24–32; C. Galatariotou, “Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender,” *BMGS* 9 (1985): 55–96; E. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *ChHist* 67 (1998): 1–31. For the romances/novels, see C. Jouanno, “Women in Byzantine Novels of the Twelfth Century: An Interplay between Norm and Fantasy,” in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience, 800–1200*, ed. L. Garland (Aldershot, 2006), 141–62; A. Goldwyn, *Byzantine Ecocriticism: Women, Nature, and Power in the Medieval Greek Romance* (Cham, 2018); I. Nilsson, *Erotic Pathos, Rhetorical Pleasure: Narrative Technique and Mimesis in Eumathios Makrembolites’ Hysmine & Hysminias* (Uppsala, 2001). On art history, see M. Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text* (New York, 2009); L. James, “Goddess, Whore, Wife or Slave: Will the Real Byzantine Empress Please Stand Up?,” in *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*,

historiography’s assumed referential relationship with the past poses an existential threat to its traditional practice, scholars invested in historiographical analysis have always pulled back from such approaches.<sup>25</sup>

Reframing the study of Byzantine historiography in nonreconstructive terms—that is, as a contribution to a grammar or poetics of Byzantine historiographical narrative—offers numerous possibilities. This article pursues just one: the gendered production of characters, specifically female characters, in a single text, the *Chronike syngraphe*. While this focus redresses the tendency to ignore female characters, it risks making male characters appear an unproblematic, normative, or even gender-free standard, from which female characters deviate.<sup>26</sup> However, the systematic analysis of

ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997), 123–39; L. Brubaker, “Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the 4th and 5th Centuries,” in *Women, Men and Eunuchs*, ed. L. James (London, 1997), 52–72. Such developments have remained relatively conservative when compared to those in the neighboring fields of classics and Western medieval studies: see, e.g., C. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, 1999); A. Hollywood, “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 173–79. Such transformative studies have only occasionally influenced the study of historiographical narratives. For one recent example, which combines historiographical and other texts, see Nilsson and Messis, “Eros as Passion, Affection and Nature” (n. 1 above), 159–90. On fictionality generally, see H. Nielsen, J. Phelan, and R. Walsh, “Ten Theses about Fictionality,” *Narrative* 23 (2014): 61–73.

25 For studies specifically related to gender in theory and practice, see Kaldellis, “The Study of Women and Children”; C. Messis and A. Kaldellis, “Conjugal Violence and the Ideological Construction of Byzantine Marriage,” *Limes Plus* 13 (2016): 21–40. For a more general critical materialist response to the challenge posed by nonreconstructive approaches to historiography, see J. Haldon, “Jargon’ vs. ‘the Facts?’ Byzantine History-Writing and Contemporary Debates,” *BMGS* 9 (1984): 95; idem, “Byzantium after 2000: Post-Millennial, but Not Post-Modern?,” in *Novum Millennium: Studies on Byzantine History and Culture Dedicated to Paul Speck*, ed. C. Sode and S. Takács (Aldershot, 2001), 1–11; Macrides, “Editor’s Preface” (n. 9 above). For a more general medieval response, see G. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, 1999).

26 Such an outcome could not be further from the aim of this article, which seeks to destabilize precisely that unproblematised male normativity as it analyzes the dynamics that produce female characters. The systematic analysis of male characters constitutes a natural extension of this research, beyond the scope of this article. On the tendency in the field of narratology to problematize only the female in gendered terms, see S. Lanser, “Gender and Narrative,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (17 June 2013; rev. 15 September 2013), <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/86.html>.

how female characters are produced in the *Chronike syngraphe*—specifically how they are identified, what they are presented as doing, and how they are made meaningful—reveals how certain characters are discursively produced as more or less human, important, and meaningful. Instead of emphasizing reconstructive questions that cannot ultimately be verified, such as “Is this representation of X past woman accurate or true?,” this nonreconstructive framing asks instead “what violence has occurred in order to tell these stories this way, and more importantly, what violence has occurred in order to establish these stories (common sensically) as the way they should or ought to be told.”<sup>27</sup> This article thus seeks to demonstrate not only the importance of asking the kinds of questions posed by Michelle Ballif in her critique of reconstructive women’s histories, but also the capacity of a nonreconstructive framework to ask questions framed at this level of textual dynamics.

### Absence and Identification

Before embarking on three detailed case studies, I must explicate two of the basic properties of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*. The first and most obvious observation to make about female characters in the text is quantitative: there are simply far fewer of them—only sixty-five, as compared to well over 600 male characters.<sup>28</sup> Large sections of the narrative—especially those with a military focus, such as the Bulgarian campaigns (§§53–62)—are populated almost exclusively by male characters.<sup>29</sup> Thus the foundational and central characteristic of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*, as it is in most premodern historiography, is absence.<sup>30</sup>

27 M. Ballif, “Re/Dressing Histories; or, on Re/Covering Figures Who Have Been Laid Bare by Our Gaze,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22 (1992): 92.

28 The exact number of male characters depends on how those in groups (e.g., the Romans, the inhabitants, the army) are counted. It has been suggested that two characters—Anna and Theodora, the daughters of a ruler of Bulgaria—are in fact the same person, but since they appear as separate characters in the text, they are treated as two characters in this study. On their possible identity, see Macrides, *George Akropolites* (n. 4 above), 208, n. 5.

29 Female characters are featured in just over half of the 89 uneven sections into which the text has traditionally been divided. On these section divisions, see Kinloch, “Rethinking Thirteenth-Century Byzantine Historiography,” 72–73.

30 See J. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75; M. Cabrera,

Second, when they do appear in the *Chronike syngraphe*, female characters are signified by three major types of referring expressions: proper names (e.g., Maria, Laskarina), descriptions (e.g., the empress, the wife of John, or John’s daughter), and pronouns (e.g., she, her, this).<sup>31</sup> These referring expressions each produce different effects. The study of pronouns will not feature heavily in this study, since they themselves typically depend on either a proper name or a description for reference. My analysis focuses instead on the difference between the more foundational referring expressions, proper names and descriptions. Characters signified by proper names tend to be more referentially accessible (i.e., easier to identify anaphorically and cataphorically) and more referentially available (i.e., more prominent in both the scenes in which they appear and the narrative as a whole) than those identified by descriptions.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore of fundamental importance that, as the case studies will show, descriptions (both generally and of particular kinds) are the dominant means of identifying female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*.

Female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* are most often relationally dependent on male characters, because they are primarily identified through descriptions that relate them to male characters.<sup>33</sup> Every female character that appears is signified through a description of their familial and/or sexual relationship to one or more male characters, either as wife, mother,

“Language, Experience, and Identity: Joan W. Scott’s Theoretical Challenge to Historical Studies,” in *The Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott’s Critical Feminism*, ed. J. Butler and E. Weed (Bloomington, 2011), 31–49.

31 U. Margolin, “Naming and Believing: Practices of the Proper Name in Narrative Fiction,” *Narrative* 10 (2002): 108–9. Note that I use the loose term *descriptions* to refer to several different types of description—definite descriptions (e.g., the empress), modified definite descriptions (e.g., the wife of John), and definite descriptions or proper names modified by an attributive noun or noun phrase (e.g., the emperor’s wife or John’s daughter). Some of the differences between them will be examined in what follows, but for this argument the term functions mainly to distinguish various types of identificatory descriptions from the use of proper names.

32 For proper names as “rigid designators,” see S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980), 48. See also A. Sanford, K. Moar, and S. Garrod, “Proper Names as Controllers of Discourse Focus,” *Language and Speech* 31 (1988): 43–56. *Anaphoric* and *cataphoric* references are signs that refer, respectively, backward or forward in the text.

33 Laiou, “The Role of Women,” 233–60. For an example from analogous historiographies, see B. de Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khātūns, 1206–1335* (Edinburgh, 2017), 4.

daughter, sister, concubine, or sexual partner. This list is exhaustive. There are no exceptions. Even the Virgin Mary, whose relics and icon appear three times in the text, is signified exclusively through the relationally dependent description of “mother.”<sup>34</sup> For many female characters this is the only way in which they are identifiable, since they lack a proper name or even an identifier that does not explicitly refer to their relationship with a male character. Relational descriptions, such as “the wife of X,” regularly make it unnecessary for even relatively prominent female characters to have proper names. Where proper names are allocated, they are (almost exclusively) less frequent than and are (in most cases) paired with relational descriptions, which normally precede the proper name in the sentence. In contrast, male characters are never identified (either exclusively or even primarily) by descriptions relating them to female characters. Instead, they are identified either by proper names or by descriptions that relate them to other male characters.

The relational descriptions of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* subordinate female characters to male characters at the very moment that they are brought into existence in the text. The “wife/daughter/mother of X” is not an autonomous individual but a subordinate character. Each is dependent (either in part or in whole) on a male character. This means that every female character in the text must be associated with (and effectively identified as the property of) some male character, both syntactically and semantically. When, as is common, a female character has neither a proper name nor an alternative appellation by which they can be identified, their very (textual) existence is outsourced to the male character(s) on which they depend. The process of identification is both foundational for—and symbolic of—the wider subordination of female characters in the narrative. Their range of actions is dramatically more limited than that of their male counterparts, as female characters appear principally in semantically and syntactically passive roles. These roles function primarily as a mechanism for connecting or reflecting on male characters and their actions. Many of these characters are so passive and marginal that they even fail to satisfy some of the more

restrictive definitions of character.<sup>35</sup> In short, the relative absence and the overwhelmingly relational identification of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* are the foundation of their systematic subordination, examined in detail in the case studies that follow.

## Case Studies

### *Sister-in-Law, Wife, Daughter, Maria*

The female character here referred to initially as Maria provides a fairly typical example of an elite female character in the *Chronike syngraphe* and thus is a good starting point for this analysis.<sup>36</sup> This character is produced principally through relational signifiers, as passive in action, and as of marginal importance to the central narrative. Maria features in the following three passages of the *Chronike syngraphe*:

ἀφίκετο μέν, ως ειρήκειν, εἰς Θεσσαλονίκην ὁ εἰρημένος βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξιος καὶ ὑπεδέχθη παρὰ τῆς αὐτοῦ νύμφης, ἡ ἐξ Οὐγγρων μὲν ὥρμητο, ἐπεγαμβρεύθη δὲ τῷ βασιλεῖ Ἰσαακίῳ μετὰ τὴν τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ τελευτῆν. (12.24–13.3 [§8])<sup>37</sup>

As I mentioned, the said emperor Alexios arrived in Thessalonike and was received by his sister-in-law, who had originated from the Hungarians, but had been married to the emperor Isaac after the death of his wife. (123, slightly adapted)<sup>38</sup>

... ἐπειδὴ καὶ ὁ μαρκέσιος ἀξιόλογον μοῖραν τῇ συμμαχίᾳ ἦν ἐνεγκάμενος, ῥὴξ Θεσσαλονίκης

35 Here, the debate in narratology concerning the line between characters (conceived of as complex semantic units) and actors (i.e., not-necessarily anthropomorphic entities occupying a particular structural position within narrative) is relevant, although this article deploys a less restrictive definition. These definitional debates underline the extent to which female characters neither map directly onto women nor are inextricable from their narrative production. On the definition of characters, see Bal, *Narratology* (n. 18 above), 114–15; Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds” (n. 18 above).

36 For a recent historicist treatment, see Malamat, “Marguerite-Marie de Hongrie.”

37 All quotations from the *Chronike syngraphe* are from Akropolites (n. 3 above), cited parenthetically in the text.

38 All translations of the *Chronike syngraphe* are from Macrides, *George Akropolites*, cited parenthetically in the text.

34 Akropolites, 20.5 (§11), τῆς θεομήτορός; 187.28 (§88), τῆς θεομήτορός; 187.29–30 (§88), μητρὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.

παρὰ τοῦ Φλάντρα τετίμητο, προσλαβόμενος καὶ γυναικα τὴν δηλωθεῖσαν Μαρίαν τὴν ἐξ Οὐγγρίας, πρότερον προσηρμοσμένην Ἰσαακιώ τῷ βασιλεῖ. ὑπὸ ταύτης, ὡς ἔφην, ὁ βασιλεὺς ὑπεδέχθη Ἀλέξιος. (13.10–15 [§8])

Since the marquis had borne a notable share in the alliance, he was honoured by Baldwin of Flanders as *rex* of Thessalonike, and he took as wife the said Maria of Hungary who had formerly been attached to the emperor Isaac. It was by her, as I mentioned, that the emperor Alexios was received. (123)

τοῦ βασιλέως Ἰσαακίου τῆς Κωνσταντίνου κατάρχοντος, καὶ τῆς γαμετῆς θανούσης αὐτοῦ, ἡγάγετο εἰς γυναικα τὴν ἣν προειρήκειν ἐξ Οὐγγρίας ὥρμημένην, θυγατέραν οὖσαν τοῦ τῶν Οὐγγρῶν ἄρχοντος. (18.6–10 [§11])

When the emperor Isaac ruled over the city of Constantine and his wife died, he married the woman whom I previously mentioned who came from Hungary and was the daughter of the ruler of the Hungarians. (133)

In the first passage Maria is identified by three descriptions: first as “his [Alexios’s] sister-in-law,” then as “of/ from the Hungarians,” and finally as “married to the emperor Isaac.” It is not until twelve lines later, after a lengthy description of how the Latins and Venetians divided the territories they had conquered, that this character is endowed with a proper name. Again, three identifiers are deployed. She is first described as wife of the king of Thessalonike, only later as “Maria of Hungary,” and finally again as the former wife of the emperor Isaac. When Maria appears in the *Chronike syngraphe* for the third and final time, 169 lines later, she is once more identified without a proper name, presented as the woman from Hungary married to the emperor Isaac and as the daughter of the ruler of the Hungarians.<sup>39</sup>

39 The relationship between ethnic and gender identification lies beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it represents a key avenue of analysis, analogous to the attempt to consider the intersection of other dynamics with gender attempted in the section “Unnamed Wives,” below.

This female character is signified only once by means of the proper name *Maria*, despite appearing at three points in the narrative and being identified eight different times. She is mainly identified extrinsically through her relationship to male characters. Her role as the wife of somebody is her principal identifier (three times as wife of the emperor Isaac and once as the wife of the king of Thessalonike). However, she is also identified as sister-in-law and daughter, two relational identifiers that also link her to male characters—and that are closely related to her marital status. She is the sister-in-law of Alexios, because she is married to Isaac; and she is married to Isaac, because she is the daughter of the ruler of Hungary. Even her identification as “of/from the Hungarians” and “of Hungary” is underpinned by Maria’s position as daughter of the ruler of the Hungarians and her consequent value and relevance as a wife. It is these descriptions, rather than the proper name *Maria*, that make this character available for anaphoric and cataphoric reference.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, even when it appears, the proper name *Maria* is syntactically marginalized. “*Maria*” is sandwiched between two other relational identifiers, which explain her in terms of relationships to male characters (i.e., as wife and former wife).

The signifiers used to distinguish *Maria* from other characters in the text subordinate her to the text’s male characters. This occurs even before the roles that she plays in the story itself are examined. Yet there too she is subordinated to male characters. In her three textual appearances, *Maria* participates in action six times, always as a passive object of the action of male characters.<sup>41</sup> Most often, *Maria* is presented as participating in her own marriage, to Isaac (described three times) and to the king of Thessalonike (described once). In each case, she is the object of action, being given away, taken, or married (ἐπεγαμβρεύθη, προσηρμοσμένην, προσλαβόμενος, and ἡγάγετο). In the other two cases, *Maria* is presented as participating in the reception of Alexios. In the action that occurs in the story, *Maria* is active, receiving Alexios in Thessalonike. When

40 This is of particular importance, because the text contains another character named *Maria* who is identified as being from Hungary.

41 On the misogynist interpretation of ambiguous phrases in classical Greek, in which female passivity is assumed, see D. Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts: Gender and Exchange in Ancient Greece* (Austin, 2012), 69–70.

referred to in the text, however, subject and object are reversed: Alexios is produced as the subject of both the clauses in which this reception is described, while Maria's action twice is made passive (*ὑπεδέχθη*). Further, just as Maria is the object of the actions of male characters in the story, so too is she the object of male action at the level of narration. In her third appearance in the narrative, the authorial I, identified with the male character George Akropolites, identifies her as "the woman whom I previously mentioned," seemingly to an assumed male audience.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Maria's subordination to male characters transcends various different levels of narration.

Finally, as well as being identified relationally and presented as passive in action, Maria is never central to the meaning or importance of the action described. Instead, she functions mainly to facilitate plot developments that are meaningful because of the ways in which they relate to and affect male characters and their actions. In Maria's first two appearances, both in section 8, she features in a narrative that is about the emperor Alexios and the Italian occupation of Rhōmania (the territories of the Byzantine Empire) after the capture of Constantinople in 1204. The focus on Alexios is made clear in the sentence immediately preceding Maria's first appearance in the text:

Αλλ' ἐνταῦθα μοι ὁ λόγος ἀναμεινάτω. ιστορῆσαι  
γὰρ βούλεται τὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ Ἀλεξίῳ συμβάντα,  
ἥδη δὲ καὶ τάλλα τὰ ἐπὶ τῇ ἑσπέρᾳ γενέσθαι φθά-  
σαντα. (13.22–4 [§8])

But let my account of the east pause here, for it is my intention to narrate what happened to the emperor Alexios and all the other things that had already taken place in the west. (123)

The passivity of Maria in relation to Alexios's reception should be understood in the context of this wider narrative. The text, both in her first and in her subsequent appearances, is simply not about her. In the second appearance, her marriage to the marquis serves principally to illustrate the wider subordination of Rhōmania. Maria, like the territory of Rhōmania, is occupied by a Latin invader. Maria's fate runs parallel to that of Alexios, who is depicted as wandering

42 Akropolites, 18.9 (§11).

aimlessly between his former possessions, himself now dispossessed. In her third appearance, Maria is even further removed from the main thrust of the narrative, which is about the Bulgarian–Byzantine conflict that led to the creation of a second Bulgarian polity and the earlier subjugation of the Bulgarians by Basil. Maria's (brief and nameless) appearance is necessary (albeit barely) to describe the wedding that would spark the conflict. The wedding is presented as meaningful, though the cause of the "rebellion" of the Bulgarians is not Maria herself but rather the excessive extraction of livestock from the Bulgarians for the celebration.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in her three textual appearances Maria occupies varying, but consistently marginal, positions.

So far, I have referred to the character under analysis in this section as Maria. However, this character is the product of a textual development that constructs "her" sign by sign. First she is sister-in-law, then Hungarian, then wife of Isaac, then wife of the marquis, and only then Maria, and she has still more designations after this inaugural moment of proper naming.<sup>44</sup> Before this character is endowed with a proper name, there is no Maria. Semiotic chronology—that is, the sequence in which these signs are accumulated—is essential to understanding characters and their roles in action, as Mieke Bal has demonstrated in her feminist narratological reading of the construction of Eve in Genesis:

Semiotic chronology is involved, however, when we conceive of characters as a product of a textual development that constructs them, piece after piece, by the signs; characters, then, "exist" only insofar as they have been signified.... "Eve" exists only at the end of Genesis 3, where her name is mentioned for the first time. What existed before was an earth creature, then a woman, next an actant, then a mother, and, finally, a being named "Eve."<sup>45</sup>

43 Akropolites, 18.22 (§11).

44 For the moment of first naming as an "initial baptism," see Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (n. 32 above), 96.

45 M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, 1987), 107; see also R. Freund, "Naming Names: Some Observations on 'Nameless Women' Traditions in the MT, LXX and Hellenistic Literature," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 6 (1992): 213–32.

"Maria," like Bal's Eve, transforms as she accumulates signs (sister-in-law of Alexios, Hungarian, wife of Isaac, wife of the marquis) throughout the narrative. At any moment in the text, "Maria" exists only insofar as she has been signified. However, this dynamism is obscured (and even erased) when scholars attempt to pin down a constantly evolving textual unit in order to reconstruct a past human. Modern reconstructions demand the stabilization and unification of characters, so that these accumulations of signs can be used as representations of individual human beings. In modern reconstructions, proper names are typically privileged as the signs under which other textual elements are organized.<sup>46</sup> For example, during the first appearance of "Maria" in the *Chronike syngraphe*, she is not yet named as Maria. However, scholars retrospectively organize the attributes and actions attributed to this developing (but as yet unnamed) character under the proper name Maria.<sup>47</sup> In so doing, they give the illusion of the fullness, stability, and personhood that come with a proper name to what is in fact a dynamic and transforming accumulation of signs.<sup>48</sup> This process may appear innocuous, but a consequence of this aspect of reconstructive analysis is the erasure of the disparity in proper naming (and other identificatory practices) between characters in historiographical narratives—in this case, between those gendered female and male. A nonreconstructive approach creates space for the integration of semiotic chronology into the analysis of characters.

The character "Maria," found in the *Chronike syngraphe*, has been used in combination with characters from other texts (such as the *Chronike diegesis* of Niketas Choniates) as source material to create a "historical woman," capable of sustaining a "factual" (if

46 The importance of proper names is perhaps most clearly illustrated in prosopographies and indexes (on which see below), where past humans are organized according to their proper names. Where proper names are not available, the term *Anonymous* (often with a number) is typically deployed as a surrogate proper name (i.e., no recourse is made to some other textual identifier).

47 For example, see the commentary on "Maria's" first appearance in the *Chronike syngraphe* in Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 124, n. 2.

48 Bal, *Lethal Love*, 107–8. For a different framing, see Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (n. 2 above), xix: "To claim that there is no reference to a pure body is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body."

short) biography.<sup>49</sup> This "Maria" has duly appeared in modern historiographical narratives (most often in footnotes) and in reference works.<sup>50</sup> The formalization, standardization, and reification undergone by the characters found in the *Chronike syngraphe* and other medieval texts to produce this new "historical woman" should not distract from the fact that the product of all that historiographical labor remains text-grammatical. The "woman" created by modern scholars is in fact nothing of the sort. Maria remains a female character in modern scholarship—or more accurately many female characters, since each article and monograph produces a different one. Even at the most basic (and apparently referential) level, scholars produce Maria in dramatically different ways in their own narratives, depending on the main object of their research, the nationality of the scholar, and the language of the source material that is given most weight. The indexes of modern scholarship, for example, produce a range of different characters, organized under different proper names and with a multiplicity of descriptions. A handful of examples demonstrate this range. The index of the commentary on the *Chronike syngraphe* by the Byzantinist Macrides has an entry for "Margaret-Maria of Hungary, empress, wife of Isaac II, wife of Boniface of Montferrat"; the index of Frenec Makk's history of dynastic relations between Hungary and Byzantium, *The Árpáds and the Comneni*, features "Margaret, daughter of Béla III, second wife of Isaac II Angelus"; Alexandru Madgearu's history of the Asanid dynasty of Bulgaria has an entry for "Margaret-Mary (daughter of Béla III)"; and Attila Zsoldos's history of Hungarian queens, *The Árpáds and Their Wives*, features "Margaret (Margit), princess (daughter of King Béla III of Hungary)."<sup>51</sup> The Marias, Margarets, Marys, and Margits of modern historiography, with their range of proper names and descriptions, thus prove to be no less defined by the narratives that bring them into existence than was the character found in the *Chronike syngraphe*. Likewise, they prove to be no less subordinate to their male relations, since all

49 Nicetae Choniatae, *Historia*, CFHB 11, 2 vols. (Berlin and New York, 1975), 1:368.42–46, 598.4–7, 599.23–27, 600.58–59, 601.67.

50 See Malamut, "Marguerite-Marie de Hongrie" (n. 22 above).

51 Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 431; F. Makk, *The Árpáds and the Comneni: Political Relations between Hungary and Byzantium in the 12th Century* (Budapest, 1989), 209; A. Madgearu, *The Asanids: The Political and Military History of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1280)* (Leiden, 2017), 355; A. Zsoldos, *The Árpáds and Their Wives*, trans. T. Pálósfalvi (Rome, 2019), 246.

remain dependent on some male character for reference. In stark contrast, the index entries for these male characters (Boniface of Montferrat, Isaac II, and Béla III), with only one exception, do not refer to “Maria.”<sup>52</sup> In short, the production of “Maria” in modern historiography and her systematic endowment with proper names neither produce a past human nor extricate her from the subordinate position of the character in the *Chronike syngraphe*, from which she is in part derived.

This examination of “Maria” has demonstrated the extent to which modern reconstructions erase the textual disparities that differentially produce male and female characters and simultaneously reinscribe them. At the same time, it has illustrated how female characters are typically identified and presented throughout the *Chronike syngraphe*. “Maria” is principally identified through her relationship with male characters, is largely passive in action, and is of marginal importance to both the immediate and wider plot. The vast majority of the text’s female characters, like “Maria,” both are imperial (or at least aristocratic) and appear in a handful of episodes. The next two case studies will focus in turn on the narrative’s most and least prominent female characters, in order to examine the full range of female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*.

#### *Daughter, Wife, Empress, Mother, Eirene*

Easily the most prominent female character in the *Chronike syngraphe* is the character identified in Macrides’ index as “Eirene, empress, wife of John III.”<sup>53</sup> This Eirene, who died in 1239, was empress for seventeen years. Relationally, she stands at the heart of the imperial Laskarid family and thus also of the narrative of the *Chronike syngraphe*, linking her father (Theodore I Laskaris), husband (John III Doukas-Vatatzes), and son (Theodore II Laskaris). Appearing in thirteen different scenes throughout the first two-thirds of the text, Eirene is featured more often than the two next most prominent female characters combined—though much less regularly than the most prominent male characters,

52 Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 422, 427; Madgearu, *The Asanids*, 352, 354; Makk, *The Árpáds and the Comneni*, 204, 208; Zsoldos, *The Árpáds and Their Wives*, 241, 245. The single exception is Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 421: because Bela III does not appear in the *Chronike syngraphe*, his appearance in Macrides’ commentary is dependent on that of his daughter.

53 Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 424. For a detailed historicist analysis, see Mitsiou, “Ειρήνη Δούκισσα Κομνηνή” (n. 22 above).

such as her father, husband, and son.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Eirene is a relatively prominent character and is treated in far greater detail than any other Nicaean empress.<sup>55</sup> The analysis of Eirene, the most privileged among all female characters, enables us to establish the absolute limits placed on them in the *Chronike syngraphe*. Her presentation conforms to the main elements of the textual subordination of female characters discussed so far, despite being mitigated in various ways by Eirene’s otherwise highly privileged position. Eirene is principally identified through descriptions, rather than a proper name, and is mostly passive in action. Further, when she is not passive her actions either are specifically designed to reflect on relevant male characters or are limited to the domain of child-rearing. The proper name *Eirene* is used here to identify the character under discussion. However, like *Maria*, this signifier is a shorthand that collapses a dynamic textual entity, which accumulates and discards signs as the narrative progresses.

#### DAUGHTER

Eirene’s first appearance in the *Chronike syngraphe* is as one of four female characters that accompanied Theodore I Laskaris:

ἀπελθών οὖν οὗτος μετὰ τῆς σφετέρας γυναικὸς καὶ τῶν τέκνων—ύπηρχον γάρ αὐτῷ θυγάτρια τρία, ὧν ἡ μὲν πρώτη Ειρήνη, ἡ δὲ δευτέρα Μαρία, ἡ δὲ τρίτη Εὐδοκία κατωνομάζοντο—καὶ περὶ τὴν Νίκαιαν πόλιν γενόμενος παρεκάλει τοὺς Νικαεῖς ἔσω τοῦτον τῆς πόλεως δέξασθαι καὶ ὡς κυρίω προσανέχειν αὐτῷ. (10.17–23 [§6])

So, departing with his wife and children—he had three daughters of whom the first was named Eirene, the second, Maria, and the third, Eudokia—and arriving at the city of Nicaea, he appealed to the Nicaeans to admit him into the city and to accept him as their lord. (118)

Before being identified with the proper name Eirene, this character is identified by two relational descriptions. She is first one of multiple τέκνων (children)

54 The two next most prominent female characters are a different Maria, also from Hungary but married to John Asan, who appears six times, and Eirene’s sister Eudokia, who appears five times.

55 Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 57.

and θυγάτρια (daughters) belonging to Theodore. Rather than being involved in the action described, Eirene is an accompanying attribute of Theodore. Indeed, she is so irrelevant to the action presented that as this passage proceeds to narrate Theodore's negotiations with the inhabitants of Nicaea, she and her sisters simply fall out of the narrative. The impasse before Nicaea is resolved with the inhabitants accepting Theodore's (so far anonymous) wife but not Theodore himself, who leaves for the hinterland. However, the narrative never bothers to explain if the daughters enter the city with the unnamed wife or leave with their father. The text is so focused on Theodore's actions that those of his daughters become irrelevant. Indeed, it goes further, placing Theodore at the center of this passage's relational and identificatory schematics. All the passage's female characters are identified through him, as wife or daughters, leaving the relationship between Theodore's wife and daughters ambiguous. A reader might assume that they are the daughters of both Theodore and (t)his wife, but the connection is not specified, because of a relational and identificatory structure that never identifies female characters by their relationship to each other.

Eirene's position within the list of Theodore's (marriageable) daughters is duplicated in her second appearance in the *Chronike syngraphe*:

Αλλ' ὁ λόγος μοι καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸν βασιλέα Θεόδωρον τὸν Λάσκαριν ἔφορμῷ. οὗτος γὰρ ἐκ τῆς αὐτοῦ γαμετῆς Ἀννης, ὡς ἔφην, τρεῖς ἐποιήσατο θυγατέρας, Εἰρήνην, Μαρίαν καὶ Εὐδοκίαν. τὴν γοῦν Μαρίαν τὴν δευτέραν τῶν αὐτοῦ θυγατέρων τῷ ρήγῃ Οὐγγρίας διερχομένῳ τὴν αὐτοῦ χώραν ἐκ τῶν Τεροσολύμων εἰς κῆδος ἐπὶ υἱῷ παραδίδωσι, τὴν δὲ πρώτην αὐτοῦ θυγατέρα τὴν Εἰρήνην ἀνδρὶ συζεύγνυσι τῷ Παλαιολόγῳ Ἀνδρονίκῳ, ὃν καὶ δεσπότην τετίμηκε. μετ' οὐ πολὺ δὲ ὁ δεσπότης Παλαιολόγος θνήσκει, ὡς μέν τινες ἔφασκον, ἐξ ἑρωτικῶν διαθέσεων, καὶ προσλαμβάνεται ὁ βασιλεὺς εἰς γαμβρὸν Ἰωάννην τὸν Δούκαν, οὐ Βατάτζης τούπικλην. καὶ ἐκ Διδυμοτείχου ἦν ὡρμημένος, τὸ τοῦ πρωτοβεστιαρίτου διενεργῶν ὁφθίκιον. (26.10–22 [§15])

But my account returns to the emperor Theodore Laskaris. He had three daughters, as I said, by his wife Anna: Eirene, Maria and Eudokia. Maria, the second of his daughters, he gave to

the king of Hungary, in marriage for his son, when the former was passing through his land on his return from Jerusalem. His first daughter, Eirene, he joined to Andronikos Palaiologos, whom he also honoured as despot. Not long after, the despot Palaiologos died, some say from a sexual condition, and the emperor took as a son-in-law John Doukas whose surname was Vatatzes; he was from Didymoteichon and exercised the function of *protovestiarites*. (148)

In this passage, Eirene's proper name appears twice, but both times it is preceded by the description of her as Theodore's daughter. This passage is about the consolidation of the nascent Laskarid polity through marital politics. In the narrative Eirene and her sister, Maria, are passive objects. Eirene's marriages are explained as her being joined by Theodore to Andronikos and as Theodore's making John his son-in-law. Thus, in her first appearance Eirene is a passive object. Then in the second she is totally removed from a sentence that connects two male characters while syntactically and semantically excluding her.

Eirene's brief third and fourth appearances in the text reinforce her presentation as a passive object in marriages that are about the relationships between the male characters that she links, namely her father and husbands. When describing Andronikos Palaiologos's involvement in military action, the narrative repeats the description of his marriage to Eirene. Again, the proper name Eirene is preceded by her description as the emperor's daughter. Here she is once more the object (this time indirect) in the presentation of a marriage, as Theodore is described as taking Andronikos as a husband "for his daughter."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in the description of Theodore I Laskaris's death and the consequent ascension of John to imperial power, Eirene is mentioned as the link between these two male characters and thus the reason for John's new position:

διὰ τὸ γοῦν ἀμοιρεῖν αὐτὸν ἄρρενος ἐνήβου γονῆς ὁ ἐπὶ τῇ θυγατρὶ γαμβρὸς αὐτοῦ τῆς βασιλείας κληρονομεῖ. (31.17–19 [§18])

56 Akropolites, 29.5–7 (§16).

Since, then, he was without any male offspring of age, his son-in-law by marriage to his daughter inherited his imperial office. (157)

Eirene is meaningful in her first four appearances in the narrative as daughter of the reigning emperor, relating him to various other male characters. Most importantly, she explains the transfer of imperial power by linking Theodore and John. That Eirene is identified only by being described as daughter in this section of the narrative is simultaneously constitutive and a consequence of her narrative role. Eirene first accompanies Theodore and then is disposed of by him in two marriages that serve to relate him to other male characters, a process that explains the Nicaean succession.<sup>57</sup>

#### WIFE, EMPRESS, MOTHER

Eirene's marriage to John, the death of Theodore, and the consequent ascension of John transforms the hierarchy of characters in the narrative. John becomes both the most prominent character in the text and (in the process) her relational anchor. This transformation is reflected in the principal signifiers used to identify Eirene, which switch from ἡ θυγάτηρ (the daughter) to ἡ βασιλίς (the empress) and ἡ σύζυγος (the wife). Theodore's death frees Eirene from her father's referential shadow, only to replace it with that of her new husband. Eirene's description as wife of John demonstrates a dynamic similar both to her relational production as daughter and to the production of "Maria" as wife discussed above. The most common description used to identify Eirene is, however, not wife but βασιλίς. The term is used to describe Eirene in every subsequent scene in which she appears. In twelve instances βασιλίς is deployed without the proper name Eirene, and six times in conjunction with it (i.e., as "the empress Eirene"). This description is also relationally dependent on John, the emperor, since the βασιλίς is quite literally the wife of the emperor, as the normative definition of the tenth-century *Suda* lexicon attests:

Βασιλίς. ἡ τοῦ βασιλέως γυνή.<sup>58</sup>

Empress: The wife of the emperor.

This definition not only subordinates the empress to the emperor but also makes the description of empress ontologically dependent on the description of some emperor.<sup>59</sup> Such definitional subordination is echoed in the fourteenth-century *Offices and Ceremonies* of Pseudo-Kodinos, another normative text, which describes how the empress must perform *proskynesis* (prostration) to the emperor after her coronation, acknowledging physically her subordinate position and subjugation.<sup>60</sup> Although different from the description of *wife*, *empress* retains the same fundamentally relational and subordinate qualities. Eirene's narrative production as empress echoes this normative (legal, definitional, and procedural) subordination.

The fifth appearance of Eirene is markedly different from the previous four, since it inaugurates her transformation from daughter to empress in the semiotic chronology of the character and situates her in her first active narrative role. She appears at the end of an extended description of a plot against John that was orchestrated by his cousin, Andronikos Nestongos. The presentation of the plot begins by briefly stating that John abandoned his campaign against the Italians, narrated in the previous section. There follows a list of Andronikos's many high-ranking accomplices, their close relationships to John, and an abrupt statement

58 *Suidae Lexicon*, ed. A. Adler, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1928), 1:460 (§β.162).

59 On the legal status of empresses, see the *Basilika* (2.6.1); S. Maslev, "Die Staatrechtliche Stellung Der Byzantinischen Kaiserinnen," *BSL* 27 (1966): 308–43; Garland, *Byzantine Empresses* (n. 13 above), 1.

60 R. Macrides, J. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham, 2013), 224.12–15 [225]: ἡ δέ, ἐπιτεθέντος τῇ κεφαλῇ αὐτῆς τοῦ στέμματος παρὰ τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς χειρός, εὐθὺς προσκυνεῖ τὸν βασιλέα καὶ ἀνδρα αὐτῆς, ὥσπερ ὅμολογοῦσα διὰ τῆς προσκυνήσεως ὑπ' αὐτὸν εἶναι καὶ ὑποτετάχθαι αὐτῷ (After the crown has been put on her head by the emperor, her husband, she at once makes her *proskynesis* to the emperor, her husband, as if to acknowledge by this *proskynesis* that she is subordinate to him and that she has been subjected to him). On this passage, see R. Macrides, "Women in the Late Byzantine Court," in *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, ed. E. Galake and E. Mitsiou (Athens, 2019), 189–90, n. 10. See also F. Schrijver, "The Court of Women in Early Palaiologan Byzantium (ca. 1260–1350)," *BMGS* 42 (2018): 219–36.

57 In her translation Macrides spells out the implied "by marriage" in order to make the meaning of the passage clear, but the Greek simply connects the two characters with ἐπί, somewhat vaguely making John's role as "his son-in-law" dependent on his relationship to Theodore's daughter.

that the plot failed. Considerably more attention than was paid to the plot itself is given to the description of John's merciful treatment of the captured conspirators, ending with this damning indictment of his liberality:

ἐντεῦθεν ὁ βασιλεὺς προσεκτικώτερον ἔχρητο τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ τῆς προτέρας ἐλευθεριότητος οὐκ ἀντεποιεῖτο, φύλακάς τε περὶ αὐτὸν ἔστησε καὶ φρουρούς, νύκτωρ καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν τοῖς ἐκείνου προσέχοντας. μάλιστα δὲ περὶ ταῦτα συνέτεινεν ἡ βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη, ἀρρενωπότερον τὸ ἥθος ἔχουσα καὶ τοῖς πᾶσι βασιλικώτερα ἐντυγχάνουσα. (37.25–36.5 [§23])

Henceforth the emperor acted more cautiously in his affairs and did not adopt his former openness, but set up around him sentinels and guards who watched over his subjects day and night. The empress Eirene was especially intent on these matters, for she had a more manly disposition and met with all people in a more imperial way.<sup>61</sup> (170)

Here, Eirene serves as a counterpoint to John: his actions are cast as weak and effeminate, as her manly and imperial disposition is compared with his implicit failure to be either manly or imperial.<sup>62</sup> This is the first time in the text that Eirene appears as the subject in a sentence. Her syntactic activity presents a significant departure, as does her prominence in the narrative. However, both her activity and prominence prove fundamentally limited. First, the action in which Eirene participates is not new but rather is something (*ταῦτα* [these things]) already attributed to John in the preceding sentence. Her action is consequently produced as an addendum to John's. Furthermore, Eirene is also subordinated to John at the level of meaning. The qualities attributed to her derive most of their meaning not from how they reflect on her but rather from how they reflect on a male character, her husband John. Moreover, Eirene's actions and the character traits they

<sup>61</sup> I have adapted Macrides' translation here to avoid making Eirene passive as in the original, where Macrides prioritized rendering the Greek word order ("Especially intent on these matters was the empress Eirene"), and to retain the emphasis on relating to people rather than things in the final clause (where Macrides has "and in all things was more imperial").

<sup>62</sup> For this observation, see Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 171, n. 13.

are presented as reflecting are themselves positive only because they are already gendered as male.<sup>63</sup> Eirene is caught in a paradox, since the very actions that resist and invert assumed gender norms are enabled by those very same norms. While her paradoxical situation does not entirely foreclose agency (understood as something characters are endowed with in/by the narrative/text), it rearticulates agency as something immanent to the power of those authoritative gender norms, rather than an external force in opposition to them.<sup>64</sup> This passage thus produces an ambiguous Eirene, who is at once active and yet structurally passive, whose momentary narrative prominence is only a postscript to male action, whose action and character are produced only/principally to transform a male character, and who inverts the normative gender relations assumed by the text only to reinforce their general validity.

The next seven textual appearances of Eirene must be examined together, since they all relate to the marriage alliance conducted between John and Asan (the ruler of Bulgaria), in which their children (Theodore and Helen, respectively) were betrothed.<sup>65</sup> The story of the unsuccessful marriage alliance unfolds over the course of approximately 200 lines (§§31, 33–34, 36). The narration of the marriage is intertwined with and repeatedly interrupted by the presentation of military campaigns, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and Akropolites' education. The narration of the marriage alliance is framed as an illustration of John's *δεινότης* (cleverness/skillfulness), both in dealing with the Latins (the object

<sup>63</sup> On female virtue as male action, see Neville, *Byzantine Gender* (n. 12 above), 60–64.

<sup>64</sup> This dynamic has been framed as the paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*). On this and Butler's attempt to affirm a queerness that refuses to reinstall a heteronormative "reverse-discourse," see Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (n. 2 above), xxiii, 169–85.

<sup>65</sup> On marriage alliances generally, see R. Macrides, "Dynamic Marriages and Political Kinship," in *Byzantine Diplomacy: Papers of the Twenty-Fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990*, ed. S. Franklin and J. Shepard (Aldershot, 1992), 263–80. On this specific marriage alliance, see N. Koutrakou, "Politics, Strategies and Women in Byzantium (11th–13th Centuries)," in *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, ed. E. Galake and E. Mitsiou (Athens, 2019), 79–81; Mitsiou, "Εἰρήνη Δούκαινα Κομνηνή" (n. 22 above); S. Georgieva, "Bulgarian-Byzantine Marital Diplomacy from 1185 to 1280," *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 3 (2012): 435–38; G. Cankova-Petkova, "Griechisch-bulgarische Bündnisse in den Jahren 1235 und 1246," *BBulg* (1970): 49–80; V. Gjuselev, "Bulgarien und das Kaiserreich von Nikaia (1204–1261)," *JÖB* 26 (1977): 143–54.

of the previous passage, §30) and in strengthening his own polity. As this framing suggests, John is at the center of the narrative. He is set in opposition to his Bulgarian counterpart (Asan) and the passage revolves around the relationship of these two male characters, while their wives (Eirene and Maria) and children (Theodore and Helen) perform supplementary roles. The centrality of John and Asan is established at the outset, when the marriage story's cast is introduced:

έγεννήθη γάρ αὐτῷ υἱὸς ἐκ τῆς βασιλίδος Εἰρήνης,  
ῳ καὶ κλῆσις τοῦ πάππου καὶ βασιλέως Θεοδώρου  
τοῦ Λασκάριος ἐπετέθειτο. ἐνδέκατον δέ οἱ ἔτος  
τότε ἤνυετο. καὶ ὁ Ἀσὰν δὲ θυγάτριον ἔσχεν—  
Ἐλένην αὐτῇ τούνομα—παρὰ τῆς ἐξ Οὐγγρῶν  
γαμηθείσης αὐτῷ. ἔννατον καὶ ταύτη ἔτος ἦν.  
(48.19–24 [§31])

For a son had been born to him by the empress Eirene, to whom the name of his grandfather, the emperor Theodore Laskaris, had been given. He was then in his eleventh year. Asan also had a little daughter—Helen was her name—born to him by his Hungarian wife. She was in her ninth year. (191)

Eirene's labor (both literal and metaphorical) is appropriated by John, in a sentence that presents her as an indirect vector for the birth of *his* son. The presentation of how Asan came to have a daughter is framed in precisely the same manner, albeit alienating Maria to an even greater extent by presenting her without a proper name.

The marriage is then arranged by John and Asan, through envoys; and when the narrative picks up the story of the marriage alliance, after a digression on Akropolites' education, it is once again John and Asan who are credited with organizing what is described in tripartite terms as *ἀγχιστεία* (kinship), *συνασπισμός* (military alliance), and *συγκρότησις* (support).<sup>66</sup> At this point, Asan (with Maria and Helen in tow) arrives in Kallipolis to meet John, and John then takes these two female characters to Lampsakos for the betrothal. Eirene was waiting in Lampsakos and was thus present for the betrothal, but neither she nor even the engagement itself retains the focus of the narrative, which

slides away from the ceremony to discuss ecclesiastical politics. Through the vector of the celebrant—another male character, the patriarch Germanos—the narrative focuses on the ecclesiastical and political consequences of the treaty: namely, that the bishop of Tarnovo became autocephalous from the patriarch of Constantinople.<sup>67</sup>

Eirene plays a grammatically active role only briefly and only after the betrothal:

Ἐπεὶ γοῦν ὅσα εἰς τὰ τοιαῦτα φέρει πεπλήρωται,  
ἥ μὲν βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη τὸν υἱὸν μετὰ τῆς νύμφης  
λαβοῦσα τοῖς ἔψιοις συνδιητάτο χώροις, ὡσαύτως  
δὲ καὶ ἡ τοῦ Ἀσὰν σύζυγος ἐν τοῖς οἰκείοις τόποις  
ὑπέστρεψεν. (51.4–7 [§33])

When all that relates to such matters had been accomplished, the empress Eirene, taking her son and his bride, lived with them in the eastern territories; in like manner, Asan's wife returned to her own regions. (195)

In this single sentence, Eirene is the active subject, exercising authority over two young children.

After this, the narrative deals extensively with the campaign of John and Asan against the Latins, a campaign made possible by the marriage alliance.<sup>68</sup> Only then does the narrative return to mention that Eirene was responsible for raising and educating both children:

ἀνήγοντο δὲ παρὰ τῆς βασιλίδος Εἰρήνης καὶ  
ἐπιαδεύοντο, οἴα ἐκείνη φύσεως ἀγαθῆς τυχοῦσα  
καὶ πρὸς ἄπαν καλὸν ἐπινεύουσα. τὰ μὲν οὖν τῶν  
Λατίνων πράγματα συνεστάλη τε τότε πολύ, καὶ  
τῷ κήδει τῶν δύο αὐτοκρατόρων εἰς ταπεινὸν ἄγαν  
καταπεπτώκει τούτων τὸ φρόνημα. (52.13–18  
[§34])

They were raised and educated by the empress Eirene as she had a good nature and was of a kindly disposition. The affairs of the Latins were reduced a great deal at that time, and so their spirit was very much humbled by the marriage connection of the two monarchs. (197, slightly adapted)

67 Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 196, nn. 6–7.

68 Akropolites, 51.7–52.9 (§33).

These flashes of activity are highly unusual for female characters in the text, yet even these exceptional moments are limited by structural constraints. Eirene's activity is confined to domestic responsibility for children and is characterized by the highly gendered virtues of having a good nature and a kindly disposition. In contrast to the description of her manly disposition, which presented Eirene as encroaching on the male sphere of politics and violence, her close association with children places her activity firmly within a traditional female sphere of action. Importantly, all these actions are framed around the narrative of the core concern of the text: the military, political, and ecclesiastical relations between the Nicaean, Bulgarian, and Latin states. These are principally inflected through the persons of their male rulers.

Nike Koutrakou has recently argued that the instability of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century politics resulted in the increasing importance of women through their involvement in "kinship diplomacy," citing the description of this marriage alliance in the *Chronike syngraphe* as one example of what she calls "empowerment par excellence."<sup>69</sup> Noting that Eirene and Maria were "not absent" at the engagement of their children, she contends that "their role was probably more significant than it appears at first glance."<sup>70</sup> Koutrakou's argument implicitly relies on getting past the textual form of these female characters (i.e., the "first glance") to the real women from the past they are understood to represent. This process, however, glosses over the fact that none of the text's female characters actually play a particularly significant role in the narrative. If Eirene's and Maria's lack of absence ranks as an example of female "empowerment par excellence," then Koutrakou's example seems to illustrate the extent to which female characters are discursively subordinated in late Byzantine historiography.

After giving an account of the imperial succession in Latin Constantinople, the narrative proceeds by describing how Asan reneged on the alliance and took Helen back, before his treacherous actions were

<sup>69</sup> Koutrakou, "Politics, Strategies and Women," 79–81. For a more general framing of this thirteenth- and fourteenth-century partial emancipation theory, see Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady* (n. 11 above), esp. 3. For a critique of it, see Macrides, "Women in the Late Byzantine Court."

<sup>70</sup> Koutrakou, "Politics, Strategies and Women," 80.

divinely punished and he decided to return her. Eirene appears four times in this part of the narrative. In three of these appearances, Eirene and John act as one imperial married unit:

καὶ ἀποστέλλει πρέσβεις πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα καὶ τὴν βασιλίδα. (53.1–2 [§34])

And he [Asan] sent ambassadors to the emperor and empress. (197)

ὁ μὲν οὖν βασιλεὺς Ἰωάννης καὶ ἡ βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη, καίτοι γε ἀκριβῶς εἰδότες τὸ δράμα καὶ καθαρῶς ἐπιγνόντες τὴν σκευωρίαν, ὅμως πέμπουσι πρὸς τὸν Ασὰν τὴν θυγατέρα. (53.5–8 [§34])

Then, although the emperor John and the empress Eirene saw through the act completely and clearly recognized the trick, they sent to Asan his daughter. (197)

οἱ μὲν οὖν βασιλεὺς Ἰωάννης καὶ ἡ βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη, οἵα ἔκεινοι πρὸς τὰ εὐσεβέστερα καὶ θειότερα ἀπονεύοντες, δέχονται τε τὴν πρεσβείαν. (53.12–17 [§36])

Since the emperor John and the empress Eirene were inclined to righteousness and holiness, they received the embassy. (201)

Eirene and John are sent ambassadors, discern Bulgarian trickery, are righteous and holy, and receive an embassy as a single unit. Although Eirene's inclusion should not be ignored, we must observe that in all three passages, John precedes Eirene and dominates action in which she appears in a subordinate and assistive role, almost as an extension of his character.<sup>71</sup>

In her fourth appearance, Eirene is presented as the object of Helen's affection and is paired with her son, Theodore, instead of her imperial husband, John:

ὁ μὲν οὖν Βούλγαρος τὴν θυγατέρα λαβὼν ὥχετο, τοὺς ἐπομένους αὐτῇ πάντας ὀπισθορμήτους ποιήσας, καὶ τὸν Αἴμον διαβάς ἔχώρει περὶ τὸν Τρίνοβον, κλαιούσης μὲν τῆς αὐτοῦ θυγατρὸς καὶ

<sup>71</sup> Koutrakou (*ibid.*) again argues that Eirene's presence suggests her importance.

δλοφυρομένης καὶ τῆς πενθερᾶς καὶ βασιλίδος  
Ειρήνης καὶ τοῦ συζύγου λίαν ἐποδυρομένης τὸν  
χωρισμόν. (§3.12–17 [§34])

However, the Bulgarian, taking his daughter, left, making all those attending her hasten back and, crossing the Haimos, he proceeded towards Trnovo, with his daughter crying and lamenting all the while and greatly bewailing the separation from her mother-in-law, the empress Eirene, and her husband. (198)

In this sentence, the subject is the Bulgarian (i.e., Asan). The details of his (unnamed) daughter's response to the Bulgarian's action are relegated to a subordinate clause, in which Eirene is introduced as her πενθερά (mother-in-law) and paired with her prepubescent (and also unnamed) son. In this pairing, Eirene precedes her son and is endowed with a proper name and the description of empress, in addition to the relational description of mother-in-law, unlike the unnamed husband, Theodore. Asan dominates the action, with Eirene and the children relegated to a subordinate clause. Eirene is endowed more prominence than these children, although her relational importance as both mother-in-law and mother is central to her position. In these last four marriage-related passages, Eirene is again “not absent,” but neither is she fully present as an individual character. She finds herself either subsumed into the character of John or pushed to the margins of action.<sup>72</sup> In the first three instances she is both syntactically and semantically produced as a secondary extension of John. Only as the secondary partner in this pair can she become an active subject. In the fourth instance, despite the absence of John her prominence is restricted to the subclause of a sentence about Asan's action and to the predictable domain of rearing children.

In most of the sporadic mentions of the marriage alliance, Eirene is not absent, but the story is never really about the marriage alliance itself. The military campaigning that surrounds these various passages is the central focus of the narrative. The political and consequent military relationship between John and Asan, the two principal competing characters, is foregrounded. A clear hierarchy is established that places the male rulers (John and Asan) first, their

wives (Eirene and Maria) second, and their children (Theodore and Helen) last. Only in the realm of children, with which the wives are systematically associated, is Eirene relatively prominent.

#### DEAD WIFE

The roles played by Akropolites—simultaneously the author, the narrator, and a character of the *Chronike syngraphe*—are a defining feature of the text.<sup>73</sup> Akropolites' life blends into the narrative of thirteenth-century warfare and politics in a range of ways. Some scenes simply interject happenings in Akropolites' life, such as a short digression on his education (§32), but most integrate Akropolites' personal relationships and military-political actions into the wider narrative. The narrative of military campaigning in Macedonia in which Akropolites was a key participant (§66–72) and the depiction of Akropolites being beaten by Theodore II's macebearers after giving the emperor advice (§63) both demonstrate, in different ways, the inextricability of Akropolites' personal story from that of thirteenth-century politics.

One such scene involves Eirene. Having previously laid out the political and military exploits of the Epirot Manuel Komnenos Doukas (§38), the narrative notes that he died (§39). This is followed by (or rather prompts) mention of Eirene:

Θνήσκει δὲ καὶ ἡ βασιλίς Ειρήνη, γυνὴ σωφρονική τε καὶ ἀρχικὴ καὶ πολὺ τὸ μεγαλεῖον ἐπιδεικνυμένη τὸ βασίλειον. ἔχαιρε δὲ καὶ λόγοις καὶ σοφῶν ἡκροᾶτο μετὰ ἡδονῆς ἐτίμα δὲ τούτους ὑπερβαλλόντως, ὡς ἔστιν ἐκ τούτου γνώναι. (62.19–23 [§39])

The empress Eirene died also, a woman both temperate and regal who exhibited imperial majesty greatly. She took pleasure in learning and listened to learned men with delight. She valued them exceedingly, as can be seen from this. (210)

At the moment of her death Eirene is praised in imperial terms, which recall and extend her earlier deployment as manly and imperial, in opposition to

<sup>73</sup> Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 44–46; eadem, “The Historian in the History” (n. 8 above).

an effeminate and un-imperial John.<sup>74</sup> In addition, mention of Eirene's interest in learning sets up an excursus about other male characters in the form of an extended description of a conversation concerning an eclipse of the sun that involves Akropolites, a physician called Nicholas (painted as ignorant, in contrast to Akropolites), and John, as well as Eirene. The climax of this debate is Eirene's intervention in defense of her favorite, Nicholas, and her branding of Akropolites as a fool:

ἐν τῷ μεταξὺ τῶν λεγομένων ἀπεκάλεσέ με ἡ βασιλὶς μωρόν. εἶτα δὴ ὥσπερ τι οὐ προσῆκον ἐργασμένη, πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα στραφεῖσα “ἀπρεπῶς ἄρα εἰρήκειν” ἔφη “καλέσασα τοῦτον μωρόν.” καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς “οὐ καινόν· μειράκιον γάρ ἔστιν.” εἴκοσι γὰρ σὺν ἐνὶ τότε ὑπῆρχον ἔτών, καὶ οὐ πάμπαν ἀπάδει τούτου τὸ πρόσρημα. ἀλλ’ ἡ βασιλὶς “οὐ χρεών” φησι “τὸν φίλοσόφους λόγους προφέροντα οὐτωσί γε προσαγορευθῆναι παρ’ ἡμῶν.” (63.18–25 [§39])

In the course of what was being said, the empress called me foolish. Then, as if she had done something which is not proper, turning toward the emperor, she said, “Perhaps I spoke improperly when I called him foolish?” And the emperor replied, “It is not strange, for he is a young man”—(I was 21 years old then)—“and the name is not altogether unbefitting him.” But the empress said, “It is not right for us to address in this manner a person who proposes philosophical theories.” (210–11)

In the moment in which she brands Akropolites as foolish, Eirene momentarily takes control of the scene, before immediately becoming passive in her double deferral, first to John and second to male philosophers.

This is a deferral explicitly to all philosophers, but implicitly here to Akropolites himself. The demonstration of Akropolites' youthful importance and erudition is the main thrust of this episode. Mention of Eirene's love of learning, signposted at both the beginning and end of this episode, functions principally as a platform for that demonstration:

74 See Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 212, n. 2.

ἔχαιρε δὲ καὶ λόγοις καὶ σοφῶν ἡκροάτο μετὰ ἡδονῆς. ἐτίμα δὲ τούτους ὑπερβαλλόντως, ὡς ἔστιν ἐκ τούτου γνῶναι. (62.21–23 [§39])

She took pleasure in learning and listened to learned men with delight. She valued them exceedingly, as can be seen from this. (210)

αὐτ’ εἶπον, ὡς ἂν παραστήσαιμι ὅπως τε αὕτη ἐφίλει τοὺς λόγους καὶ τοὺς εἰδότας τούτους ἐτίμα. (63.25–64.1 [§39])

I have related this to show how she loved learning and valued those who have it. (211)

Eirene's love of learning is framed in such a way that she herself is never explicitly endowed with λόγοι (learning) of her own; instead, she is presented as having appropriate appreciation of those male characters who are learned (i.e., Akropolites). While not absent, Eirene's erudition is not fully realized, either here or earlier when she was described as raising and educating Theodore and Helen.<sup>75</sup>

Even, it seems, in the narration of her own death, Eirene exists mainly to reflect on male characters, first John and then Akropolites. After her death, in three brief mentions of Eirene at later points in the text, this role does not change. Twice she is invoked in order to link various characters in the convoluted military and political landscape of alliances and conflicts dominating the story. Eirene is first mentioned to explain that Anselm of Cahieu, the Latin emperor, abandoned

75 On the framing of women in education and learning, see Tzetzes' poem quoting Aeschylus. P. Agapitos, “John Tzetzes and the Blemish Examiners: A Byzantine Teacher on Schedography, Everyday Language and Writerly Disposition,” *Medioevo Greco* 17 (2017): 15–16: Λόγοι δὲ καὶ μάθησις ἀνδράσι πρέπει. / Μέλλει γάρ ἀνήρ, μὴ γυνὴ βουλευέτω / δικαλὸς Αἰσχύλος σὲ πειθέτω λέγων (Literature and education befit men. / *Man should attend to deliberating, let not woman think* [*Seven against Thebes* 200]; / let good Aeschylus, who speaks thus, convince you). This is not to say that being described as φιλόλογος (learning-loving) is an unusual way to refer to educated women. These mentions can usefully be put into transtextual conversation with the various texts dedicated to educated Byzantine patronesses, notably to Anna Komnene, Eirene Doukaina, and the *sebastokratorissa* Eirene Komnene, that have been most extensively studied. See Agapitos, “John Tzetzes and the Blemish Examiners,” 15–16; M. Jeffreys and E. Jeffreys, “Who Was Eirene the Sevastokratorissa?,” *Byzantium* 64 (1994): 40–68; E. Jeffreys, “The Sebastokratorissa Irene as Patron,” *WJKg* 60 (2012): 177–94.

Tzouroulos because Anselm's wife, Eudokia, was Irene's sister and Anselm believed that John would not attack his own sister-in-law if she were in Tzouroulos.<sup>76</sup> Irene is mentioned a second time to partially explain why Goulamos from Albanon joined John as he campaigned in Macedonia: the reason provided is that he was enticed by John's promises, but he also happened to be related to John through his marriage to Irene's niece.<sup>77</sup> In both instances, the mention of Irene is somewhat instrumental, functioning to explain the connections between certain male characters and John. At the same time, these relationships are meaningful not in and of themselves, but only through their effect on the military affairs described.

The final mention of Irene comes in the reflective summary (both positive and negative) of John's reign and character, which follows the description of his death (§52). At one point, John is described as δαψιλεστέραν (more/rather liberal), which recalls the earlier accusation of John's ἐλευθερώτερον (openness) that was paired with Irene's elevation to a more manly and imperial disposition (§23). However, Irene is also explicitly mentioned in this passage: her death is presented as the moment after which John gave in to (heterosexual) erotic passion. Most notably, the affair John had with Marchesina, the attendant of his new wife, Anna, is detailed at some length:

ἐρώτων δὲ θηλέων ἡττάτο, ἐξ ὅτου ἡ σύζυγος αὐτοῦ καὶ βασιλίς Ειρήνη ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἐγένετο· καὶ πολλαῖς μὲν καὶ ἄλλαις εἰς φανερὰν ἔχρηστο μιξῖν, μάλιστα δὲ τῆς ἐξ Ἰταλίας ἐλθούσης ὡς θεραπαινίδος μὲν τῆς ἐξ Ἀλαμανῶν συζύγου βασιλίδος Ἄννης, ἀντιζήλου δὲ αὐτῆς γεγενημένης Μαρκεσίνης τε ὀνομαζομένης τοῦ ἔρωτος ἡττητο· καὶ ἐς τοσοῦτον τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτῆς ἐξεκρέματο, ὡς καὶ πέδιλα ὑποδεδέσθαι δούναι ταύτην κοκκοβαφῇ καὶ ἐφεστρίδας τοιαύτας καὶ χαλινά, ἐπεσθαί τε αὐτῇ πλείους ἢ τῇ κυρίως δεσποίνῃ, ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἐποίει ταῖς ἐκείνης δουλεύων ὄρέξεσι. (103.23–104.10 [§52])

He yielded to erotic passion from the time when his wife, the empress Irene, died; he had affairs openly, with many and sundry, but

he was discomfited most of all by the woman from Italy who came as an attendant of his German wife, the empress Anna. She became the empress's rival and was called Marchesina. He was so dependent on her love that he gave her red-coloured shoes to wear and a saddle and bridle of the same colour, as well as more people to escort her than the proper empress had; he did much else too, a slave to her desires. (271)

In this passage, John is overpowered by base desire and once more displays his unimperial qualities, through his characterization by means of various gendered tropes and his interaction with this hypersexualized female character.<sup>78</sup> Irene's death marks a dividing line in the actions of her husband. Her absence is meaningful, but she is nevertheless replaceable within the marital economy of the text. This point of the narrative allows both her sexual and political functions to be redistributed to other female characters. Because of John's failures, two female characters—Anna and Marchesina—are required to fully replace this most privileged female character, but even Irene cannot escape her fundamentally reflective role. Her textual manifestation is entirely subordinated to the description of her husband's character. That John depended on Irene to ward off his own erotic passion reveals more about John's sexual weakness than about Irene's character. While the description of Irene's own death was appropriated by reflections on the character of Akropolites and of John, the narrative's postmortem reflection on John focuses explicitly on John's character, invoking Irene (and for that matter Anna and Marchesina) only to shed light on it.

Irene leaves the text as she entered it, the object of the male character most closely associated with her. However, in the narrative she is transformed from the daughter of Theodore to the wife of John/empress, semiotically moving from the shadow of her father to that of her husband. What is consistent is that Irene remains in shadow. Irene is a relatively prominent character, but her narrative position is always constrained. She is consistently identified relationally through male characters, is presented as passive in action, and is of marginal importance to the main narrative. Perhaps

76 Akropolites, 85.10 (§47); Macrides, *George Akropolites*, 245.

77 Akropolites, 91.11–16 (§49); Macrides, 257, n. 30.

78 On the gendered production of Marchesina, see J. Munitiz, "A 'Wicked Woman' in the 13th Century," *JÖB* 32 (1982): 529–38.

most importantly, Eirene is restricted to a limited sphere of action. She appears overwhelmingly in relation to marriage, either as the object of marriage herself, as a mother involved in the marriage of her own son, or as a mechanism for explaining relationships through other marriages. What prominence she attains is never comparable to that of the major male characters, on whom her actions are most likely to reflect in some way. Her preeminence, such as it is, is asserted only over other female characters and children—above whom she is positioned in the narrative's implicit hierarchy of characters. Her textual appearances are consistently concerned with explaining either the central narrative of military and political affairs or the personality and character of her husband John. Eirene is always either the object of or accomplice to action that is not really her doing; she is never really an independent character. Of course, no character is autonomous, as their narrative implications are constitutive, but Eirene's basic features and actions are far more contingent on other characters than those of even much less prominent male characters. The textual moments that at first glance appear to demonstrate "emancipation" or the inversion of expectations—such as Eirene's manly disposition, her role in the education of a foreign bride, and the strange conversation she holds with Akropolites—while significantly different from how less privileged female characters are presented, never fully dissolve the normative parameters of expected gendered action or Eirene's subordinate position.

This extensive examination of Eirene's appearances throughout the *Chronike syngraphe* demonstrates the absolute limits set by the text for female characters, since her treatment is the fullest, most positive, and most important to the narrative. Eirene is not absent from the *Chronike syngraphe*. Like even the most minor character, every one of whom contributes something to the narrative, Eirene cannot simply be removed without transforming it; nevertheless, she plays a relatively marginal role and is systematically restricted in action.

### *Unnamed Wives*

Among the least prominent female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* are the thirty-two (out of sixty-five) who are allotted no proper name. These characters illustrate the most extreme subordination of female characters in action and meaning, driven by their almost total subordination in identification. Their examination

demonstrates the value of a systematic nonreconstructive narrative analysis for studying some of the most anthropomorphically incoherent and inaccessible characters in the text, as well as the potential of that analysis to bring their study into dialogue with that of more prominent characters. Analysis in this section is divided between individual and group characters.

One such unnamed female character has already appeared in the passages cited in the discussion of "Maria," (un)namely the deceased wife of Isaac.<sup>79</sup> This anonymous former wife performs a single function in the text: explaining (repeatedly) Isaac's unmarried status, the precondition of his union with "Maria." Although "Maria" occupies a marginal position in the narrative and is largely passive in action, Isaac's unnamed wife's marginality and passivity are so extreme that she is rendered almost completely unavailable and inaccessible.<sup>80</sup> Her plot function is superfluous, since the very fact that Isaac marries implies the absence of a living wife. It cannot be said that she is passive in action, because she participates in no directly narrated action whatsoever and functions essentially as one of Isaac's attributes (wifelessness). "Maria" is ontologically dependent on Isaac, since she is totally inaccessible for anaphoric and cataphoric reference without him. The lack of a proper name is thus the culmination of this unnamed wife's marginal textual position. She is implicitly an anthropomorphic figure, but so empty that the sole content organized under her proper name, were she given one, would be her relationship to Isaac and her own death. The production of this ephemeral anonymous former wife of Isaac makes "Maria" appear relatively full and dominant; yet this dead wife is among the most prominent of the unnamed female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*, since only two others appear in more than one section of the text.

A more typical example of an anonymous female character who appears only once is found in the list of male characters who joined Andronikos Nestongos in a plot against John III Doukas-Vatatzes:

... τόν τε Φλαμούλην, ὃν μέγαν ἐταιρειάρχην  
ό βασιλεὺς τετίμηκε, τὸν Ταρχανειώτην, τὸν  
Συναδηνόν, τὸν ἐπ' ἀδελφῆ τούτου γαμβρὸν

79 See "Sister-in-Law, Wife, Daughter, Maria," above.

80 Sanford, Moar, and Garrod, "Proper Names" (n. 32 above).

Στασηνόν, τὸν Μακρηνὸν καὶ ἄλλους εἰς πλῆθος τὸν ἀριθμόν. (36.24–37.2 [§23])

... Phlamoules whom the emperor had honoured as *megas hetaireiarches*, Tarchaneiotes, Synadenos, Stasenos who was Synadenos' brother-in-law by marriage to his sister, Makrenos, and a great number of others. (169)

Here, just as Phlamoules is qualified by the title of *megas hetaireiarches*, so too Stasenos is qualified by his relationship to Synadenos, through marriage to his unnamed sister. This anonymous sister/wife is essentially an attribute of two male characters, serving only to link them together.

Numerous other female characters tentatively appear in the story or are referred to in the narrative before permanently disappearing. To see how this typically occurs, consider the following two examples. The anonymous wife of Michael Angelos, ruler of Epiros (r. 1206–1215), appears once in the text, when her husband Michael was murdered by a servant. The *Chronike syngraphe* states that the anonymous wife was in the bed when Michael was killed:<sup>81</sup>

μετ’ οὐ πολὺ δὲ φονεύεται παρά του τῶν ὑπηρετῶν ὁ Μιχαὴλ νύκτωρ ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης συγκαθεύδων τῇ γυναικὶ. (25.3–5 [§14])

Not long after, Michael was murdered by one of his servants at night, as he was lying in bed with his wife. (144)

Unlike Stasenos's wife, who plays a qualifying and relational role, Michael's wife serves no practical function within the plot. She is identified only by a description placed precariously at the very end of the sentence, like an afterthought. This indirect object can be removed without affecting either the action presented or the sentence—as indeed it was in the later paraphrasis of the *Chronike syngraphe*, where there is simply no mention of this character:<sup>82</sup>

81 Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros* (n. 5 above), 42, 45, n. 34.

82 A more extensive examination of the fate of female characters in paraphrastic and metaphrastic texts is beyond the scope of this article. However, such analysis offers an avenue for demonstrating the precarious and marginality of many types of characters. For

μετ’ οὐ πολὺ δὲ φονεύεται παρά του τῶν ὑπηρετῶν ὁ Μιχαὴλ.<sup>83</sup>

Not long after, Michael was murdered by one of his servants.

Michael's wife makes no practical contribution to the plot but adds to the vividness, drama, and horror of the murder, seeming to exemplify what Roland Barthes has termed the *effet de réel* (reality effect).<sup>84</sup>

Less vivid but more important to the plot of the *Chronike syngraphe* are two unnamed female characters who appear in the description of Boril's ascension to power in Bulgaria after the death of its ruler, Ioannitsa:

ώς γοῦν ούτοσὶ ἐτεθνήκει, ὁ τῆς ἀδελφῆς αὐτοῦ παῖς Βορίλλας τούνομα, τὴν Σκυθίδα θείαν γαμετὴν εἰληφώς, τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν Βουλγάρων γέγονεν ἐγκρατής. (24.8–10 [§13])

When he died, his sister's son, Boril by name, took to wife his Scythian aunt and became master of the realm of the Bulgarians. (140)

Neither Ioannitsa's sister (mother of Boril) nor Ioannitsa's wife (aunt of Boril) are named. Boril's mother is an attribute of Boril, while the aunt is the passive object of marriage, passed from one male character to the next. These two female characters do not participate in the action described in a meaningful way, yet their presence serves to narrate and explain the transition of royal power in Bulgaria.

The five unnamed female characters discussed in this section so far—like all those female characters presented as anthropomorphic individuals in the *Chronike syngraphe*—are implicitly or explicitly members of the aristocracy; typically they are members of one of the ruling families of a thirteenth-century polity, most

a discussion of the relationship between the *Chronike syngraphe* and its paraphrasis, see Kinloch, “Rethinking Thirteenth-Century Byzantine Historiography” (n. 17 above), 200–273, esp. 218–23.

83 Akropolites (n. 3 above), 1:215.10–11 (§14).

84 R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley, 1989), 141–48. See also R. Buurma and L. Heffernan, “Notation after ‘The Reality Effect’: Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti,” *Representations*, no. 125 (2014): 80–102; F. Ankersmit, *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology* (Amsterdam, 1989).

often Nicaean, Epirot, Bulgarian, or Latin—as are all named female characters.<sup>85</sup> Even when nameless, such individual characters can be incorporated relatively straightforwardly (though with very limited results) into reconstructions of the Byzantine past. This is not the case for the only nonaristocratic female characters in the text, who are presented not as individuals but rather as female-gendered groups or collectives. Although they include multiple individuals they are presented as unitary characters. There are eleven such female group characters in the text:

- The wives (and children) of the male Latin inhabitants of Constantinople who were permitted to leave the city during the siege
- The women who were enslaved during the sack of Constantinople
- The female servants of Akropolites' father's household
- The Skythian wives (and children) who crossed the Ister with their husbands
- The many women who died near Pegai during a particularly bitter winter
- The women of Rhodes who were sexually assaulted after the Genoese conquest
- The women of the Nicaean court with whom John III Doukas-Vatatzes had affairs
- The women of Beroe who were taken as plunder by the invading Nicaeans, listed alongside children, sheep, oxen, and movable goods
- The wives (and children) of the men of Melnik, who were exiled due to their husbands' disloyalty to a Laskarid ruler
- The women (and children) who were the only protectors of Constantinople, because the Latin army was away
- The women who hid themselves during the Nicaean conquest of Constantinople.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> The aforementioned wife of Stasenos and Akropolites' own mother are the only two individual female characters in the text not directly associated with a ruling family.

<sup>86</sup> Akropolites, 7.18–19 (§3), 8.9–10 (§4), 46.19 (§29), 53.25 (§35), 68.9–10 (§41), 86.19–20 (§48), 103.23–104.2 (§52), 113.5–9 (§56), 117.18–21 (§59), 181.22–182.3 (§85), 182.23–26 (§85).

Like other female characters, all eleven of these female group characters are identified through male characters, are passive in action, and are of marginal or no importance to the central narrative plot. Nine of these characters are explicitly identified as the property (normally wives) of either a single male character or, more often, a corresponding group of male characters, while in three instances the fate of female group characters is explained in the second half of a sentence that has already explained the fate of corresponding male group characters.<sup>87</sup> In action they either accompany male characters (the wives of the Skythians, the wives of the Latin inhabitants of Constantinople, the women who died of cold, and the women of Melnik), are the property of male characters (the women of Beroe and Akropolites' father's servants), or are the objects of violent and/or sexual male action (the women of Rhodes, Constantinople, and the Nicaean court). All eleven feature in only a single sentence, or in no more than a single clause within a sentence, and no group character is central to the plot. Instead they function as attributes of male characters or as reality effects that lend pathos to the narrative.

Two examples will serve to illustrate the salient features of these female group characters. First are the wives of the (male) Rhodians; they were either sexually assaulted or expelled from the settlement when Rhodes town was captured by Genoese invaders:

συνεκοιτάζοντο δὲ καὶ ταῖς τούτων γυναιξίν,  
εἰ μή τινα ἔξωρον οὖσαν ἢ τὸ εἶδος οὐκ ἀγαθὴν  
ἀπῆλασαν ἔξω. (86.19–20 [§48])

They also slept with their women, except those  
they expelled, being too old or not fair in looks.  
(246)

Here *τούτων* (their) refers back to *τῶν Ποδίων* (the Rhodians), who had appeared earlier. Owing to the ambiguity of medieval Greek collective nouns, this plural noun could linguistically include both male and female individuals. However, when the *τούτων* is deployed here, *τῶν Ποδίων* are distinguished from *ταῖς τούτων γυναιξίν* (lit., the women of them) and, thus,

<sup>87</sup> These three less explicit associations are the second, fifth, and eleventh in the list.

retrospectively gendered as exclusively male.<sup>88</sup> Up to this moment of retrospective erasure, the female Rhodians are (at least on a generous reading) subsumed into the male gendered group. Their emergence from the linguistic ambiguity of the collective noun serves only to make possible their subordination as the objects of violence by a different group of male characters. What should be taken from this reading is not just that this collective character is the object of male violence, exposing the routine violence of the logic of the text, but also that this group character is already erased and violated in its absence of identification even before it is revealed to be actively violated in the story.

Consider next the women of Beroe, who were part of the invading Nicaeans' plunder:

ἡμέρας ούν ἐξ ἔκεισε διακαρτερήσας ὁ βασιλεύς,  
ἐπεὶ μὴ εἶχε τι ἔτερον δρᾶσαι, λείαν τὰ Βερόης  
ἀπαντα ποιησάμενος, ἀνδρας γυναῖκας νήπια  
πρόβατα βόας καὶ σύμπαν ἄλλο κινεῖσθαι δυνά-  
μενον, εἰς τὴν Ἀδριανοῦ τὴν ὑποστροφὴν ἐποιή-  
σατο. (113.5–9 [§56])

The emperor therefore stayed there six days; since there was nothing else he could do, having plundered everything in Beroe—men, women, children, sheep, oxen, and anything else able to move—he returned to the city of Hadrian. (286)

The presentation of this female group character resembles that of many of the female group characters in the *Chronike syngraphe*, almost half of which are presented alongside their children, as a family unit associated with or possessed by a male group character. This passage makes particularly explicit the hierarchy of characters that the analysis of Eirene above has already shown. In the spoils of war women come after men, but before their children and animals.

Relatively little can be said about any of the examples of unnamed female characters (whether individuals or groups) produced in the *Chronike syngraphe*. Certainly, none provides sufficient evidence for the reconstruction of past women. Because these characters lack a proper name to give the illusion of coherence and personhood, their raw textuality and narrative functionality are emphatically exposed in a way not seen in

the presentation of “Maria” or “Eirene.”<sup>89</sup> This is particularly clear for unnamed group characters, because the mismatch between these single unitary characters and the multiple past women they are assumed to represent is so striking. One consequence of their being so resistant to reconstruction is that unnamed female characters—whether individuals or groups—have tended to be left out of modern reconstructions based on historiography. As a result, empresses and other aristocratic characters are the only female characters with which scholars have engaged in any detail. However, when we focus on characters’ textual, grammatical, and linguistic qualities—unimpeded by questions of their anthropomorphic coherence and availability for reconstruction—the analysis of these marginalized female characters becomes possible not only in absolute terms but also according to the same criteria as the analysis of more prominent characters, such as “Maria” and “Eirene.” The systematic analysis of specific textual and narrative dynamics thus enables marginal characters to be incorporated more comprehensively into the study of historiography.

The unnamed female characters in the *Chronike syngraphe* demonstrate precisely the same gendered dynamics of relational identification, passivity in action, and marginal importance to the central plot that characterize the production of less marginal female characters. In short, they confirm the dynamics observed in the production of more prominent female characters. At the same time, they illuminate a clear disparity in the production of different types of female characters. A blanket statement that female characters are subordinate fails to capture the differential operation that produces some characters as more or less human than others.<sup>90</sup> The *Chronike syngraphe* produces female characters as fundamentally less human than male ones and

<sup>89</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1927), 67–73; D. Galef, *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters* (University Park, PA, 1989); P. Pickrel, “Flat and Round Characters Reconsidered,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 18 (1988): 181–98. These unnamed female characters are flat (in contrast to round), to use the term coined by E. M. Forster. That is to say, they are uncomplicated, do not change during the narrative, and can be easily encapsulated in a single sentence. Indeed, many barely enter the narrative in their own right, featuring simply as attributes of other characters (who are almost always male).

<sup>90</sup> I am paraphrasing Butler’s thoughts on human subjectivity; see *Bodies That Matter* (n. 2 above), xvii.

unnamed female non-elite group characters as the least human of all. The three basic dynamics identified in this article thus capture only a fraction of the normative and exclusionary process that produces the differential character system of the *Chronike syngraphe*. This final case study thus not only demonstrates the capacity of a non-reconstructive approach to analyze previously neglected characters, but also points to the potential of a grammar or poetics of Byzantine historiographical narrative to provide an open heuristic framework for the analysis of both textual dynamics and their intersections.

### Conclusions and Future Directions

This article has identified and explicated some of the basic gendered dynamics of the *Chronike syngraphe*, describing three ways in which its female characters are syntactically and semantically subordinated to its male characters. First, it has demonstrated the importance of relational descriptions: female characters are overwhelmingly identified through their relationship to male characters. Close attention to identificatory and naming practices has highlighted the semiotic construction and chronology of characters, constituted sign by sign throughout the *Chronike syngraphe*. Second and third, it has shown (albeit in less detail) that female characters are overwhelmingly presented as passive in action (both semantically and syntactically) and that they are overwhelmingly marginal to the meaning that the actions in which they participate have for the wider narrative.

I have here attempted neither an exhaustive list of the ways in which female characters are subordinated nor an exhaustive description of the *Chronike syngraphe*'s gendered dynamics. Even the examination of the three basic dynamics discussed in detail are provisional and subject to future analysis, such as the systematic examination of the text's male characters. I make no claims for the universality of these dynamics across Byzantine historiographical (or for that matter any other) narratives. Instead, this article should be understood as a first contribution to two intertwined enterprises: the production of a nonreconstructive framework for the analysis of Byzantine historiography and the study of gendered dynamics in the *Chronike syngraphe*.

The nonreconstructive framework delineated here offers three clear advantages for the study of gendered dynamics in the *Chronike syngraphe* and in Byzantine historiography more generally. First, it enables scholars to

engage with those elements that are inaccessible within a reconstructive framework of analysis. By maintaining a discursive focus, we can understand how “Eirene” is named and identified, how “Maria” is grammatically related to her various husbands, and how Rhodian women are retrospectively gendered as objects of analysis, rather than as obstacles to the reconstruction of past women that must be mitigated and overcome. Second, it encourages the systematic analysis of narrative dynamics rather than the fragmented comparison of textual gobbets, understood as representing the same person or happening. The production of “Eirene,” “Maria,” and the Rhodian wives can thus be analyzed together as part of a systematic treatment of the character hierarchies and gendered dynamics produced by the narrative on which these characters are ontologically dependent. Third, it offers a mechanism for both identifying and, to a degree, circumventing the privileged position of particular types of characters—at least at the level of methodology. “Eirene” and the nameless Rhodian wives cannot be treated equally by a reconstructive analysis. In contrast, not only can a gendered grammar meaningfully compare how both are consumed by a gendered absence and lack of the qualities, capacities, and meanings that are taken for granted by male characters,<sup>91</sup> but crucially it can also examine both according to the same logic.

A gendered grammar or poetics of Byzantine historiographical narrative, however, should be understood as a tool not just for better understanding specific texts but also for framing the questions that we ask of them and the results we expect of their analysis. This article cannot claim to recover or free female characters, much less past women, either from the text or from their subordinate position within it, but it can claim to identify and explicate that subordination, albeit imperfectly and incompletely. In so doing, it contributes to a fuller understanding of the foundational violences and common senses that underlie the stories produced by and from Byzantine historiography.<sup>92</sup>

91 This lack of qualities extends at the most basic level to how characters are identified, as seen above in the case of female characters whose textual existence is inseparable from their relationships with male characters.

92 After Ballif, “Re/Dressing Histories” (n. 27 above), 92, who cites V.J. Vitanza, “Notes” towards Historiographies of Rhetorics; or, The Rhetorics of the Histories of Rhetorics: Traditional, Revisionary, and Sub/Versive,” *Pre/Text* 8 (1987): 64–66, on the violence of “common sense.”

I view this exposition of gendered subordination through the analysis of basic textual dynamics as a platform for further analysis. First, I hope that it contributes to the study of more complex gendered dynamics, whether compulsory heterosexuality or any of the other norms that emerge from the discursive construction, naturalization, and enforcement of gender in Byzantine historiography. At the same time, this demarcation of the absolute discursive limits placed on female characters is intended to aid the further analysis of the narrative functions performed by female characters. They are produced as less human than male characters, but they still perform narrative functions that cannot be dismissed. Even functions that exemplify the subordination of female characters (in action and meaning), such as their deployment to relate male characters to each other, are themselves narrative functions, which can be analyzed within a grammar or poetics of Byzantine historiographical narrative. As well as preparing the ground for deeper analysis of gendered dynamics, the framing of a grammar or poetics also provides space to broaden the scope of inquiry, by incorporating the examination of other types of textual dynamics. This study has already touched on the discursive production of characters as imperial, elite, and non-elite, but

it could also incorporate the discursive production of a range of textual phenomena, whether Romanness/barbarism, sadness, loyalty, or death.<sup>93</sup> The intersection of the production of the character “Maria” as Hungarian and of the gendered dynamics discussed above, for example, could be usefully examined within the framework outlined here.

A poetics or grammar of Byzantine historiographical narrative will always remain partial. There is no perfect or comprehensive endpoint for this mode of analysis. Its objective is not to settle the analysis of Byzantine historiographical narrative once and for all, but to open it to an alternative mode of questioning.

Institut für Byzantinistik und  
Neogräzistik der Universität  
Wien  
Universitätszentrum UZA 1  
Augasse 2–6, Kern A  
1090 Vienna  
matthewkinloch@gmail.com

<sup>93</sup> For a study demonstrating the power of such an approach in dealing with emotions, see Nilsson and Messis, “Eros as Passion, Affection and Nature” (n. 1 above), 159–90.

 I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO ARGUING WITH Ruth Macrides about this article. The work presented here is undoubtedly poorer because I never got the chance. This article, such as it is, is dedicated to her memory. It would not exist without her mentorship and it would not have been possible without her scholarship.

I am also grateful to all the members of the New Critical Approaches to the Byzantine World network, Alice-Mary Talbot, Ingela Nilsson, Colin Whiting,

Alice Falk, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

This article was partly researched within the framework of the project “Moving Byzantium: Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency” (PI: Prof. Claudia Rapp; <http://rapp.univie.ac.at/>), funded by the FWF Austrian Science Fund (Project Z 288 Wittgenstein-Preis), and it was completed during a fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.